

What is Dementia?

First Nations Perspectives and Cultural Understandings

Health Care Providers Understandings of Dementia

“Dementia is an umbrella term for a wide variety of brain disorders. Symptoms include loss of memory, judgement and reasoning, and changes in mood and behaviour. Brain function is affected enough to interfere with a person’s ability to function at work, in relationships or in everyday activities.”

— *The Alzheimer’s Society of Canada*

First Nations Understandings of Age-Related Dementia

There is some evidence that suggests age-related dementias have only recently become more common in Indigenous populations. As people live longer they are more likely to experience dementia.

Just as First Nations communities in Canada are different, First Nations peoples, communities, and cultures hold different understandings of dementia, memory loss, forgetfulness and confusion related to aging. These understandings may be very different from those held by doctors, nurses, and support workers.

Some descriptions of dementia that are common are that:

“It’s normal
It’s natural
It’s part of the circle of life
coming full circle”

Dementia may also be described as a “second childhood” and a time when one is “closer to the Creator.” A person’s spiritual beliefs often influence how dementia is viewed.

Historical changes in diet, changes to the land or environment, disconnection from culture, as well as trauma, intergenerational trauma, stress, and unresolved grief are significant factors that cause elderly people and communities to sometimes be out of balance and may partially explain a rise in the number of elderly with dementia.

Talking About Dementia

Dementia may or may not be an accepted term for all people. It may be more appropriate to speak of forgetfulness or thoughts being mixed up. There is no word that has been identified to mean dementia in Aboriginal languages in Canada. Instead, First Nations languages have words that describe the symptoms or state of mind.

