

She's A Stupid Old Fart

Dementia is an extremely difficult disease for caretakers because its cause is unknown, a cure is but a hope, and it's devastating. Find Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

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She's an annoying old thing. She sleeps much of the day, but when she is awake she can't be satisfied.

She seems to want only the basics of life that please her, satisfying both ends of her digestive system, getting constant attention while she's awake, being left undisturbed when she is asleep. And treats, she loves her treats.

She has some problems with bowel movements, but she is somehow aware enough to eagerly take her laxative each day. Some part of her natural brain endowment is still working.

Sometimes she acts stunned, frozen in place in the middle of a room as if she can't remember what she was doing or why or where she wants to go. Give her some food and she may begin to eat, turn away, then ask for more food without even looking at her plate to see that she hasn't finished what she had just been given.

I get frustrated. I don't know what to do to please her. I have a better understanding of elder abuse now that I have an elder with dementia to look after. It's easy to let your emotions and thoughts go wild when you don't know what is happening in the brain of another. I don't strike out. I don't shout, though I grumble my frustration sometimes. She doesn't seem to care.

Her name is Lucy. Who names anyone Lucy? Well, in this case, my long deceased mother-in-law, but that's another story.

At least I don't have to physically feed Lucy. She feeds herself. Cats don't use forks and spoons. Yes, Lucy is a senior feline with dementia. (A UK survey found that one in ten cats develops dementia as it gets well into its teen years.)

Though the lifespan of cats is normally much shorter than that of humans, their behaviour during their lives often matches that of humans to a shocking extent. Cats and humans do not speak the same verbal language, though both have had thousands of years to learn from the other.

Having studied cats intensively for the past two decades (my background is in sociology and education), I have observed only one marked difference between the behaviour of cats and people: when a kitten or cat wants something, it does everything within its power to get it. Human children, sadly, do not, so often miss out on much of the adult attention they desperately want.

OK, if you want to get technical, people don't clean their behinds by licking, as cats do. But cats have almost germ-free mouths, while people can have billions of bacteria and viruses in theirs. There's a lesson there, but I'm not sure what it is.

Every cat has a certain level of "talkativeness" some are always quiet and purring, some meow about everything. The change seen with senior dementia is one of increased or excessive vocalizations, and not just a simple meow. They may appear confused and not totally sure of their surroundings while vocalizing, and this behavior is more common at night, often waking up the household. - Janet Tobiassen Crosby, DVM, veterinarian and author of materials about small animals

As in humans, dementia leaves [cats] confused and distressed...Researchers from the University of Edinburgh now believe half of all cats over the age of 15 and a quarter aged 11 to 14, are suffering from "geriatric onset behavioural problems". -Laura Donnelly, Health Correspondent, The Telegraph

Feline dementia is very similar to dementia in humans. Here's the killer: dementia is the most avoidable disease known in either species. Yes, dementia is avoidable, if those in charge of a cat or a child begin early enough.

Cats in the wild live about ten years. Indoor cats often live twice that long. The older they get, the more likely they are to get a disease of old age.

The difference between a cat or a person who will eventually get dementia and one who will not is curiosity or creativity in childhood. Both, in the early years of life, require lots of attention and opportunities to explore, to learn, to satisfy their natural curiosity.

Curiosity, so the old saw goes, killed the cat. But cats have nine lives, so another goes, so they have resources people don't. When a cat lacks stimulation and inspiration for enough years, it becomes dull. When a child is denied sufficient stimulation and inspiration for its first few years, then again in the primary grades of school, it will stop being curious. As an adult, that child will join the legions of stupid people you see around you, almost everywhere you go.

Have you walked down the hallway of a nursing home that caters to the frail elderly? They sit outside their bedroom doors, staring blankly, hoping for something or someone to pass by to relieve the monotony. Dementia is the last stage of what began as a bored child, then developed into a stupid adult.

If dementia is avoidable, what can we do to help ourselves and others to avoid it? To begin with, you will not likely develop dementia because you were curious enough to read this article. Curiosity is the key. Curiosity doesn't come out the end of a hypodermic needle or in table form.

Curiosity is, in effect, a desire to learn. A constant desire to learn. It doesn't seem to matter what a child or even a middle aged adult wants to learn or to explore, so long as it's new and requires learning. Try something new. Embrace change. Get used to something different. Explore, even if it's only at your local library. You will never see a demented adult in a library.

Now you know something that could change lives. You, being curious yourself, will not likely suffer from dementia in your later years. But what you know now could prevent someone else from suffering that fate. You could change the life of your grandchild, or your child.

You could change the life of a complete stranger, if you care enough. Consider this: how might the life of a homeless person change if they had a drive to learn, to improve themselves, to change for the better? You might not be able to help that way directly, but you could join an organization with that as its primary objective.

Bill Allin is the author of ***Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems***, a guidebook for teachers and parents who want to ensure the kids they know continue to exercise their curiosity throughout their lives. Learn more at <http://billallin.com>

Author: builder

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