

UW Medicine

My Strengths

How can I use my talents and skills to make a difference?

From Myriam, living with dementia, and a community advocate:

“It is crucial – very, very crucial – to get out of the closet, and become a warrior, or at least say, ‘I’m still here.’”



Photo by Alzheimer’s Association



From Daphne, care partner, and member of Southeast Seattle dementia-friendly programs committee:

“I love coming together to try and make things happen in our neighborhood. And to actually have those things happen – it is just fantastic. It is my honor to serve.”

We all want to feel that our lives matter. And we all have something to contribute. Memory loss does not change that. During your life, you have gained much wisdom and built many strengths. You can use your talents and gifts to help others and to give yourself an ongoing sense of purpose. In this chapter, we will review the kinds of strengths you may notice in yourself. We will also explore ways you can make a difference. This includes community service, advocacy, and building *dementia-friendly communities* – places that are welcoming and inclusive of people with memory loss.

Key Points in This Chapter

- *You have valuable strengths and gifts.*
- *You can advocate for yourself and help others understand more about memory loss.*
- *You can make a difference by building dementia-friendly communities.*



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UW Voices

What Strengths Are Maintained, What Strengths Are Gained?

By Dr. Tom Grabowski, Director and Neurologist, UW Medicine Memory and Brain Wellness Center

A diagnosis of memory loss brings change into your life. But, it can also be a time of finding new strengths within yourself.

Most people who receive a diagnosis of *mild cognitive impairment* (MCI) need to make only a few changes in their daily life. Many people with MCI are fully independent. Some can keep working at their job. Even if your test results show signs of Alzheimer disease or other conditions that damage brain cells, you may not have many symptoms.

If you move from having MCI to dementia, many parts of your brain and your memory will still work well. These strengths can help you make up for problems you may have with memory loss.

Some common strengths you may notice in yourself include:

- **Doing or learning things by habit**

The parts of the brain that involve “muscle memory” – the memory of “how to do something” – often work well even when there is memory loss. For example, you will likely remember how to do physical things you’ve done throughout your life, like riding a bike, playing a musical instrument, or using a paintbrush. You can also train yourself to do something new by doing it over and over, the same way each time.

- **Finding new ways to communicate**

Memory loss can make it hard to find the right word. But, we share thoughts and feelings in many *nonverbal* ways – through body language, tone of voice, and gestures. You may find yourself becoming better at using these nonverbal ways to communicate.

- **Using your senses of vision, hearing, and touch**

The parts of the brain that help you see, hear, and feel things often keep working well. You can use these to enjoy nature, pet an animal, hold a friend’s hand, or listen to music.

- **Moving your body with balance, agility, and skill**

The parts of the brain that help you move around often also keep working well. You can use these abilities to walk around the neighborhood, dance with a loved one, or play with your grandchildren. But, some of the diseases that cause memory loss (like Lewy body dementia) may affect movement.

- **Being creative**

Your ability to see, hear, feel, or move your body can help you keep doing creative things like playing an instrument, singing, painting, or dancing. Some changes in the brain allow you to be more free to express yourself, and less concerned about what others think. They can also help you see the world a little differently. Even if you’ve never been a creative person, you may find that you come up with some new ideas and new ways to express yourself.

From Elisabeth Lindley, Nurse Practitioner, Memory and Brain Wellness Center:

“I’ve seen amazing strengths emerge in people who have memory loss. Some people with dementia have a higher awareness of the emotions of those around them, and can respond in very caring and thoughtful ways. That emotional insight can be very powerful and humbling.”

- **Responding to others’ emotions**

Even if you have a hard time understanding what someone says, you may still be able to tell how they are feeling. Their tone of voice or the expression on their face can say a lot. The ability to connect heart to heart can overcome any challenges with memory.

A diagnosis of memory loss is an opportunity to realize that your value is not based on your ability to think or remember. You can gain a lot by focusing on your ability to enjoy life in the moment, your connections with family or friends, and the wisdom you’ve gained in your life. These things do not depend on whether or not you have good short-term memory.

Living with memory loss or dementia can bring challenges. But, it is still possible to live well and to build new strengths going forward.

What can help me know my strengths and how to use them?

Look Within

You may know many of your strengths and gifts. But if you are not quite sure, try thinking about what has given you a sense of success in the past. You can also ask friends or family members what gifts they see in you.

Your healthcare providers can also help you think about your gifts. Some of your test results may show areas of strength.

To find ways to use your strengths, ask yourself what you care deeply about. Are you passionate about the environment? Do you want to help your grandchildren grow up strong and healthy? Once you know what you care about, consider what you could do to express that deep caring.

Look Outside

To get started, you could choose a way to give back that you have found meaningful in the past. If it feels challenging to do exactly what you did before, change how you did it, or bring a friend with you for support.

You might also want to help an organization you already know – such as your congregation, a club, or a senior center. You could also see if there are tasks you can help with around the house or in the neighborhood. You can be of service in your family or community, and find a way to make a difference that feels good to you.

Worksheet 7: Giving Back

I am good at:

I feel strongly about:

One way I can use this talent or this passion in my family or my community is to:

How can I advocate for myself and others?

In the months and years ahead, you may need to advocate for yourself from time to time. This is not always easy. It does not come naturally to many people.

Becoming more assertive can help you get what you need. It can also help your family and friends support you. Being confident can also help you share your opinions about how people living with memory loss are seen or treated.

Here are some ways to be assertive and advocate for yourself and others who live with memory loss:

- If you sense that you are being overlooked or “talked over,” tell others that you need a minute to say something.
- Explain what helps you feel included, such as, “Please address your questions to me, not my partner.”
- Plainly state what support you want and need, and what support you do not want or need. “Thank you for your help, but I can do this on my own.”
- Invite your friends and family to use terms that are respectful. For example, ask them to refer to someone as a “person living with memory loss.” This emphasizes that they are a person first.
- When you feel comfortable doing so, take opportunities to share with others that you are living with memory loss.
- If you see something in your community that does not support people living with memory loss, consider talking about changes you would like to see. For example, at your favorite restaurant, you could suggest that they have pictures of items on the menu, instead of just words.
- It may also help to connect with groups that are involved in advocacy:
 - Dementia Alliance International,
www.dementiaallianceinternational.org
 - Alzheimer’s Association, *www.alzwa.org* or 800.272.3900



Photo by Alzheimer's Association

Community Spotlight

Becoming an Advocate

Myriam Marquez is a retired attorney who was diagnosed with Alzheimer disease in 2009. Since then, she has devoted herself to reducing stigma toward those living with dementia. She also advocates for policy change and research.

“I like to talk to people who are afraid of getting a diagnosis, because there is still such a stigma about Alzheimer’s. I know a lot of people who have symptoms, but they don’t want to tell anyone. Getting rid of the stigma is one of my biggest passions.”

Myriam is an advocate both locally and nationally. She is a speaker and advisor with the Alzheimer’s Association and the National Alzheimer’s Project Act.

She knows that not everybody may feel called to become a public figure. But there are many big and small ways to make a difference. Myriam suggests calling state and federal legislators and telling them, “We need a cure. We need services. What have you done to help with that?”

Other ways to become an advocate include creating a team for the Walk to End Alzheimer's or talking to your local senior center about programs they could offer for persons living with dementia. Myriam says, "There are many opportunities to be an advocate. Be persistent and find the one you like the best. You may find gold on your first try. But if you don't, don't give up."

Myriam is using her skills in advocacy to help others have a good life. You may have a different way of advocating and can find support in trying it. You can find resources for advocacy on the Alzheimer's Association website, www.alzwa.org, or by calling 800.272.3900.

How can I help build a dementia-friendly community?

More and more people are becoming aware that those living with memory loss are a vital part of their community, and that they deserve the chance to stay connected and included. Sometimes, people living with memory loss can feel isolated because of stigma or barriers to staying involved.

The goal of a dementia-friendly community is to empower people with memory loss to stay active and feel included. To do this, these communities:

- Invite people with memory loss to define what would help them stay involved
- Reduce stigma and promote positive images of people with memory loss
- Make sure people with memory loss can easily access community areas and programs
- Teach staff who work with the public about how to best serve people with memory loss
- Create programs for people with memory loss to help them be active, stay connected, and use their gifts
- Provide other options that can help people with memory loss stay connected, such as transportation services or buddy systems

Ordinary people can help build a dementia-friendly community. If you'd like to be involved, you may want to talk with friends or neighbors about what can be done to make it easier or better to live with memory loss in your community. To learn more, visit the Dementia Friendly America website at www.dfamerica.org.

Building dementia-friendly communities is part of our mission at MBWC. If you would like support in brainstorming how to be involved in building dementia-friendly communities, call the MBWC Program Manager of Community Education & Impact at 206.744.2017 or email mbecker1@uw.edu.



Community Spotlight

Building Dementia-Friendly Communities from the Ground Up

In Southeast Seattle in late 2013, members of a few non-profit organizations had an idea. They invited a small group of neighbors who lived with dementia, their family members, and their friends to design their own dementia-friendly programs.

At the meeting, people used photos and objects to show what kinds of things brought them joy. Some talked about getting their hands

dirty. Others pointed to the photo of someone playing the piano. Next, they brainstormed how to transform their “boldest” ideas into dementia-friendly programs in their neighborhood.

Within a few months, the group had started a gardening program at Rainier Beach Urban Farm & Wetlands, a monthly drum circle at Southeast Senior Center, and an annual celebration at a local music venue. All the programs were designed to be accessible for people living with dementia.

Martha, one of the neighbors who dreamed up the gardening program, used to work in forestry. When asked if she enjoyed her first day at “Fridays at the Farm,” Martha replied, “I could live here!”

Connie, whose husband has dementia, also helped out. She said, “I liked the idea, because I wanted things to happen in Southeast Seattle. They had a lot of programs in North Seattle, and I liked the idea of things going on here, where we live. We just had to work at it.”

Some members from the original group continue to meet regularly. They help maintain what they started and plan yearly celebrations. In 2015 and 2016, their focus was on outreach to the large immigrant community in their neighborhood. Memory loss happens to people of many different backgrounds who all are part of the community.

To find more about dementia-friendly programs in Southeast Seattle and beyond, visit www.momentiasseattle.org.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Talk with your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

- To learn more about the Memory and Brain Wellness Center, visit depts.washington.edu/mbwc
- To set up clinic visit, call 206.520.5000



Photo by Seattle Parks and Recreation