

# WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Indigenous Perspectives  
and Cultural Understandings





## Health Care Providers Understandings of Dementia

“Dementia is an umbrella term for a 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.*

## Indigenous 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 Indigenous communities in Canada are different, Indigenous 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:

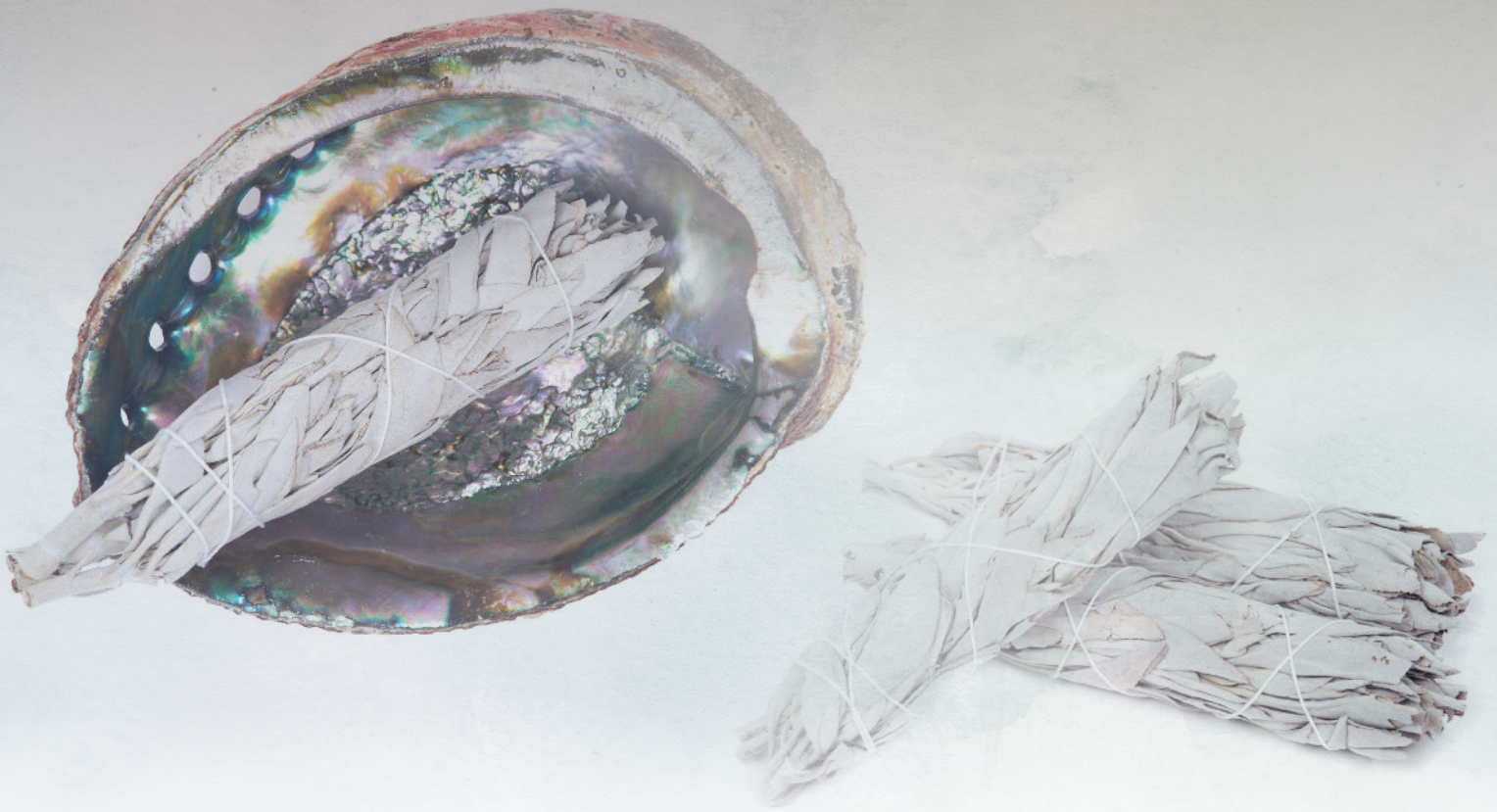
- “It’s normal”
- “It’s natural”
- “It’s part of the circle of life” or “coming full circle”

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 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, Indigenous languages have words that describe the symptoms or state of mind. For example, words and phrases such as:

- “forgetful”
- “confused”
- “thoughts mixed up”
- “something wrong with my head”
- “mind changes”
- “going back to childhood”

The words people use to describe the symptoms often indicate the severity or stage of the illness which can be helpful for health care workers, physicians and specialists in their assessments and care planning.

Health care worker interactions with Indigenous people concerning dementia should include an early conversation with the patient and family to explore their understandings of the symptoms being experienced and the acceptability of words such as dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.

*Views held by families and individuals can be respected by adjusting your language use and approach to care.*



## For more information...

Indigenous Inuit Home and  
Community Care

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)

Alzheimer's Society of Canada

[www.alzheimer.ca](http://www.alzheimer.ca)

Indigenous Cognition & Aging Awareness  
Research Exchange (I-CAARE)

[www.i-caare.ca](http://www.i-caare.ca)

Government of Canada

[www.seniors.gc.ca](http://www.seniors.gc.ca)

End-of-Life Care in Indigenous  
Communities

<http://eolfn.lakeheadu.ca/>

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