

A trip back in time

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People with Alzheimer's disease seem to vary from day to day in their recall of names and faces of people they know. This is often puzzling and stressful for carers. This article is a summary of a paper which explores the idea of Alzheimer's disease as a trip back in time.

The trip back in time idea uses a spiral of connecting loops representing the journey from the present to the past. This is not a straight line trip but is fluid and fluctuating. It shows how the person travels from the age of onset of the disease to their earliest years.

We use a spiral diagram to suggest that all the loops are connected allowing for flow and fluctuation in memory and thought processes. Variations in the size of the loops indicate more fluctuation early on in the disease. The person's capabilities change throughout the course of the disease, beginning with short term memory loss followed by difficulties with long term memories. The person's physical regression may also follow this pattern.

This trip back in time accounts for the day to day variations in the person's abilities and involves memory and thought processes, emotional, social and physical capabilities and their ability to carry out the activities of daily living.

Carers can find it extremely stressful as the person they are caring for travels back and forth along the spiral path. They find it difficult to understand how the person may, for example, recognise their grandchildren one day and not the next. Carers can feel that the person is playing a game or not trying hard enough to remember.

One of the co-authors of this paper observed a nursing home resident respond one day to being called Mrs Jones (her first husband's name) and the

next day to Mrs Davis (her second husband's name), and then back to Mrs Jones again. Later, as she travelled back to her childhood, she responded best to her first name, Lori. So, instead of constantly correcting the person, it is important to join them on their trip back in time.

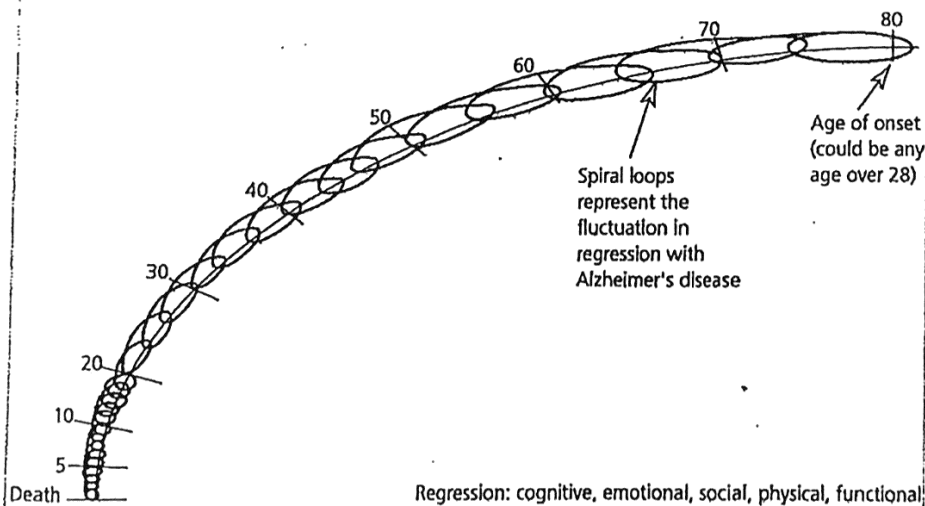
Currently, it is not clear why people with Alzheimer's disease may make brief mega shifts in memory, when they are suddenly able to move through three or four decades. We observed one nursing home resident who was bedridden, in a semi-foetal position and non-verbal. As his daughter walked into the room he said, 'Susan, your new hair style looks nice.' This interaction is inexplicable if you think about Alzheimer's disease as a linear path. However, the trip back in time model may offer an explanation.

The abilities of people with Alzheimer's disease not only vary from day to day but there may also be brief, quantum leaps in memory. In our model all the spiral loops are connected so that even when a person is bedridden and non-verbal, they can momentarily shoot back to the present with an appropriate comment.

The trip back in time model shows how it is possible to underestimate the abilities of a person with Alzheimer's disease, reinforcing dependency and exaggerating their helplessness. We hope that this model increases understanding and provides new strategies to enhance future caring techniques.

Johnson CJ, Johnson RH: Alzheimer's disease as a trip back in time. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*. 2000; Volume 15, No2: 87 - 92.

Alzheimer's disease as a trip back in time



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