

Alzheimer's in the Workplace

Many think of Alzheimer's disease as a disease of the elderly, something that happens after someone retires and is out of the workplace. However, about 200,000 Americans suffer from early onset Alzheimer's, usually diagnosed in the 50's but sometimes as early as the 30's or 40's. Most recently the diagnosis of Pat Summitt, the women's basket ball coach at the University of Tennessee has brought increasing attention to this diagnosis. Ms. Summitt is one of the most successful basketball coaches of all time with a career record of 1071- 199. She has brought attention to this condition and its broad impact.

Signs and Symptoms

The Alzheimer's Association lists the following as the most common signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's disease:

- Memory loss that disrupts daily life
- Challenges in planning or solving problems
- Difficulty completing familiar tasks, at home or at work
- Confusion about time or place
- Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
- New problems with words in speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and the inability to retrace steps
- Decreased or poor judgment
- Withdrawal from work or social activities
- Changes in mood and personality

Workplace Impact

In the workplace managers and coworkers may notice a previously high functioning employee who starts to forget meetings, make poor judgments, forget names, have difficulty with familiar tasks, have difficulty with problem solving, withdraw from coworkers, become moody and other changes in personality. A cautionary note, all these changes may have various other causes so a thorough assessment is important. A physician familiar with Alzheimer's can do the tests necessary to make a differential diagnosis. If a diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's is made, medications may help minimize symptoms and improve quality of life.

What should a manager do if an employee presents with these symptoms? It is important not to judge or diagnose the employee. Instead, meet with the employee, talk about the job performance difficulties, and refer the employee to the EAP. The EAP will assess and refer the employee to a physician for diagnosis. The EAP will act as the intermediary between the workplace and the physician and can consult with the manager to discuss options for assisting the employee while assisting the manager and the workplace.

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