



## ***The Effects of Alzheimer's***

*By Karen Lockard, LCSW, Children's Counselor*

My father died in 1998 from Alzheimer's disease. He was diagnosed in late 1994 and my parents did what many do, hide the symptoms of the disease from my sister and me for as long as possible. Understandably, they thought they could manage, and maintaining my father's dignity was deeply important for both my parents. And for those who had the good fortune of knowing him, his sense of dignity was easily appreciated.

Having this personal experience with Alzheimer's Disease, I learned that many losses occurred while my father was still alive, an unusual concept in the language for grief and loss. Alzheimer's disease creates such ambiguous losses because my father was still here but mostly gone as the person he had been during my life.

The isolation from this disease occurs on many, many levels, both for the person with the disease as well as the family taking care of him. Losses occur every time the illness pulls the person with the disease a little farther away:

- away from awareness of himself, such as how he is dressed
- away from awareness of the environment, such as where the bathroom is located
- away from awareness of how others are feeling by their tone of voice, facial expressions
- away from words that communicate what he thinks, needs, wants, fears
- away from his very identity as a father, grandfather, husband, Linguistics professor

As his family, we experienced many losses as the disease progressed:

- loss of shared history, memories of traveling, horseback riding, Dog Island

- loss of his sense of humor, warmth and obvious love of his wife and children
- loss of his vast knowledge, from how to graft a Camilla shrub to the environmental protection of the Apalachicola River
- loss of his interaction with his infant grandson
- loss of the “safety net” and comfort he offered for all of us

I don't think my family's experiences and responses to my father's illness were unusual or out of the ordinary, but I do think this is a part of life that is not talked about enough. Alzheimer's disease is cruel and many families suffer alone as they cope as best they can. If you know a family that is affected by Alzheimer's disease, reach out by preparing a meal, sit with the person who is ill, run errands, mow the lawn, do the dishes, pick up prescriptions and ASK about the person who is sick. It is often helpful to discuss the nitty gritty of care giving with someone else. Support the local organizations who serve Alzheimer's patients and their families. Lobby for research dollars for both prevention and treatment.

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