

Understanding Dementia: Confabulation

Why is mom lying?

"My family member is not usually like this!"

"Mom seems to be making up ridiculous stories to the care partners at the long term care home!"

"Mom is going crazy!"

"My mom is telling everyone that Marilyn Monroe is her aunt."

What is Confabulation?

Confabulation is a memory disturbance, defined as the production of fabricated, distorted or misinterpreted memories about oneself or the world, without the conscious intention to deceive. Confabulation is distinguished from lying as there is no intent to mislead anyone and the person who appears to be lying is unaware that the information they are telling is false.

What does confabulation look like?

The person living with dementia (PLWD) will tell a story or an experience from their past and their family or close friends will deny this event ever occurred. Or this event may have occurred, but it was not a memory of the PLWD. It may be a memory of another relative, friend or a person the PLWD has seen on television or a character in a book they may have read.

Sometimes the event the PLWD describes is quite bizarre such as a murder committed in their house or a grand trip they just returned from. The PLWD may say they won some extraordinary award and yet it was their sister or a close friend that actually won this award.

The story they tell could have some truth to it, or it can be a story that makes absolutely no sense to individuals that know this person well. The terminology for this strange occurrence is called "confabulation" or used as a verb: "confabulate". The person's family members or friends will become quite upset about this "behaviour" and question why the PLWD would so blatantly lie.

Why would my family member lie?

Although it may appear that the person is fabricating a story or out rightly lying, it is very important to realize that the person is not deliberately trying to mislead anyone or lie. The person living with dementia is usually unaware that their memories are inaccurate. They are not purposefully fibbing. They are not trying to cause trouble. They truly believe what they are saying. This is not a hallucination. While the exact causes of confabulation are not known, it may occur whenever there is damage to certain parts of the brain, for instance, the basal forebrain. This is one of the structures important in the production of the brain chemical called acetylcholine, which is widely distributed throughout the brain. Acetylcholine affects the ability of the brain cells to transmit or pass information from one cell to another. Damage to this structure can cause amnesia or confusion in the individual's memories. This damage can be caused by an aneurysm, Korsakoff syndrome (a dementia related to alcohol misuse) and Alzheimer's disease (this is not a complete list of the causes). Confabulation is a memory disorder that is defined as the spontaneous production of false memories; either memories or events that never occurred, or of actual events that are displaced in time or space. The PLWD has holes in their memory, and they are unknowingly filling these holes with information that comes to them.

What can we do to help?

How should you respond to your family member or friend when they confabulate? Try not to dwell on the false information.

We believe what our brain tells us, it is our perception of the world around us. If someone tells us our perception of reality is false, it would be very frightening.

There is really no right response to confabulation; whatever works with the individual and prevents an escalation of an upset response from the PLWD is best. In the early stages of dementia, when you have a conversation with someone, try to have the radio and/or television turned off, so the content of your conversation does not get skewed by other incoming information.