

Experiencing dementia through education tool | Life Happens



By William J. Dagendesh | April 7, 2025 | Originally published in the Tri-Lakes Tribune.

MONUMENT | On March 18, my attitude regarding dementia was forever changed, thanks to an exercise that simulates what it's like to suffer from the condition.

On that day my wife, Peggy, and I attended an hour-long Virtual Dementia Tour at the Jackson Creek Senior Living Center. The VDT is an education and training tool that provides a glimpse into what it's like to experience dementia. Our mothers suffered from dementia and we sought to better understand this condition that figured in their mental and physical decline.

Dementia results from several diseases and injuries that affect the brain. Behavior includes anger, anxiety, aggressiveness, confusion, disorientation, and language and communication difficulties. It is the seventh-leading cause of death, and a major cause of disability and dependency among senior citizens.

The World Health Organization reported that 55 million people worldwide have dementia. The number is expected to hit about 140 million by 2050. The VDT builds sensitivity and awareness by altering participants' physical and

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sensory abilities. The tour simulates symptoms and tricks the brain into responding and behaving like a dementia sufferer.

Within minutes upon arrival, certified instructors outfitted participants with eyewear, audio equipment and hearing devices designed to distort vision, and alter hearing and sense of touch.

Almost immediately, I felt disconnected from my surroundings. My vision was restricted and I saw only shadows. I experienced limited sense of touch and couldn't make sense of the sounds and voices around me. I wondered if this is what it feels like to lose one's independence, and if it contributed to my mom's verbal abuse and erratic behavior.

I was surprised to learn that experiences vary from difficulty in understanding simple instructions to feeling total isolation. One man, whose wife resides at the facility, fought back tears as he described his experience and spoke of his wife's ordeal.

It was then I understood that this condition is unique to those who endure it. I had no idea our mothers experienced such discomfort and disconnect. How could I have appreciated their gradual decline in function and loss of connection to the world? After all, I was only a spectator. I couldn't get inside their head.

Like most everyone, I try to be non-judgmental of others. Regrettably, I haven't always been successful as I too, have asked "WTF?" when observing people talking to themselves or behaving erratically. I wasn't being insensitive. I was just ignorant. It's the human condition.

On that day, I walked away with more than a story. I also got a new-found respect for dementia patients and caregivers. The VDT provided an education I can't get from a textbook, and mine was an experience I will not forget. Never again will I take anyone or their situation for granted because you truly don't appreciate who you have until they are gone.



That evening, Peggy and I discussed our experience and decided to educate our children as to what they can expect if ever we are diagnosed with the condition. Until that day, I can say with certainty that I will never again ask "WTF?" As the old saying goes, don't judge a person until you walk a mile in their shoes. Today, my shoes fit a lot more comfortably.

William J. Dagendesh is a writer, author and retired U.S. Navy chief journalist and public affairs officer. He and his wife, Peggy, have lived in Colorado 25 years.