



Personality Change—A Family Member’s Perspective

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A vivid memory I have from my mother’s journey with Alzheimer’s disease is this—I walked into the facility in which my mother lived and saw her happily waltzing with one of the aides. This might not have been a shock, had my mother been a dancer, but my mother did NOT dance.

In fact, the only dancing my mother ever did was with her kids in the privacy of her own kitchen. My father, also a non-dancer, frequently said that it was one of the many things they had in common—they would both, according to Dad, rather be “boiled in oil” than to be seen on the dance floor.

Yet, there my mother was, cutting the proverbial rug.

The sight was both disconcerting and comforting simultaneously. I was glad that my mother was happy, of course. However, it scared me too. It aroused questions that come to mind for many family members of those with Alzheimer’s—Was my mother experiencing a personality change? Was it permanent? Would there be others? If so, would she be anything like her former self, or would she become as unrecognizable to me as I sometimes was to her?

I felt guilty and confused. I wanted to be supportive, but I also wanted to hang on to the image of the woman I had always known so well.

Thankfully, like so many other aspects of this mysterious disease, personality changes are not necessarily permanent or pervasive. In my mother’s case, she became a veritable dancing machine, but retained the same sweet temperament she always had—just with added rhythm. She was still able to respond to me as one of her family members, albeit a different one at different times. More importantly, I realized what I was witnessing was a process experienced by every person with Alzheimer’s disease who moves into a facility. I was seeing my mother adapt to a new environment.



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Despite the changes caused by my mother's Alzheimer's, her brain was busily reconciling information from her spottily recollected past and her perception of the present. She was compensating and adapting for her cognitive deficits in new ways.

My mother's repertoire of skills had to change. The ones that had been effective at home no longer applied.

It took time for me to realize and truly appreciate my mother's adaptability. It took time for me to learn not to panic and categorize each one of my mother's new behaviors as evidence of an irrevocable change in her personality. Ultimately, I realized that it was my issue, my resistance to change.

I began to see other family members grappling with similar instances of possible personality change. A staunch vegetarian gobbled down a hamburger. A lifelong "social butterfly" had to be moved to a different table to be discouraged from fighting with her table mates. An avid sports fan asked for the channel to be changed in the middle of a game.

I noted that all family members walk through some version of these experiences and feelings, and that is what made us uniquely qualified to support one another.

None of my mother's sojourn was easy. It was heartbreaking, mysterious and baffling. However, it was also true that, through the generosity of family members sharing their experiences, I was able to marvel at the brain's incredible ability to adjust to a new environment. With the support of others, I was able to be grateful for the indomitable nature of the human spirit, as evidenced by my mother and others who had Alzheimer's disease.

I could, with the support of others, continue to walk with her.