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Forgetfulness: Knowing When to Ask for Help

Maria has been a teacher for 35 years. Teaching fills her life and gives her a sense of accomplishment, but recently she has begun to forget details and has become more and more disorganized. At first, she laughed it off, but her memory problems have worsened. Her family and friends have been sympathetic but are not sure what to do. Parents and school administrators are worried about Maria's performance in the classroom. The principal has suggested she see a doctor. Maria is angry with herself and frustrated, and wonders whether these problems are signs of Alzheimer's disease or just forgetfulness that comes with age.

Many people worry about becoming forgetful. They think forgetfulness is the first sign of Alzheimer's disease (AD). Over the past few years, scientists have learned a lot about memory and why

some kinds of memory problems are serious but others are not.

Age-Related Changes in Memory

Forgetfulness can be a normal part of aging. As people get older, changes occur in all parts of the body, including the brain. As a result, some people may notice that it takes longer to learn new things, they don't remember information as well as they did, or they lose things like their glasses. These usually are signs of mild forgetfulness, not serious memory problems.

Some older adults also find that they don't do as well as younger people on complex memory or learning tests. Scientists have found, though, that given enough time, healthy older people can do as well as younger people do on these tests. In fact, as they age, healthy adults usually improve in areas of mental ability such as vocabulary.

Other Causes of Memory Loss

Some memory problems are related to health issues that may be treatable. For example, medication side effects, vitamin B₁₂ deficiency, chronic alcoholism, tumors or infections in the brain, or blood clots in the brain can cause