



Judith London

## *Connecting the Dots:* Breakthroughs in Communications as Alzheimer's Advances

By Judith London, Ph.D.

### What inspired you to write your book on Alzheimer's?

My patients were my inspiration. Over the years, I learned many wise lessons from my "teachers," people who were in the middle to late stages of Alzheimer's disease.

People who no longer said, "Hello," whose vacant stares mistakenly sent out the message, "I am no longer here." I didn't believe that. I began to do group therapy with them even though they could not remember my name nor what happened even moments before.

I was amazed. The wise, funny and insightful comments they made touched me so that I knew that I had to get the message out to relatives, friends and caregivers: "when you reach out to connect with a loved one with Alzheimer's, he or she will connect back with you. There is hope."

### Is Alzheimer's a slow death sentence?

Alzheimer's disease is a slow, progressive and irreversible brain disease that eventually leads to an inability to function on all levels, physical and mental. People usually succumb from some other illness like pneumonia, for example, perhaps because they no longer can cough to clear their breathing passages.

### What are some of the misconceptions about the brain disease?

Alzheimer's accounts for about 70% of all dementia. Alzheimer's is more than just forgetfulness. When you forget where you put

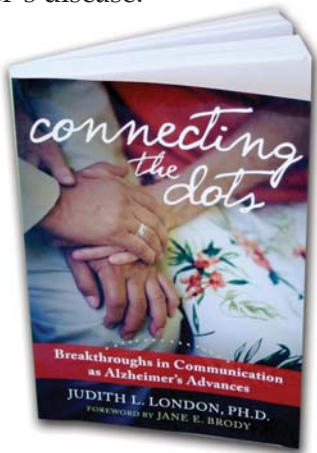
your car keys, that's normal. But when you no longer know what the keys are used for, that may be Alzheimer's. That's why getting checked out medically is step one whenever there is any sustained memory loss.

A misconception about Alzheimer's is that when someone you know no longer

recognizes you, people believe that all is lost. Actually, unconscious memory survives until the very end, and even if he or she cannot remember your name, your kindness and caring comes through.

### How do you communicate with someone with middle or advanced Alzheimer's?

As indicated in the book, communication begins with a smile. Attitude makes the difference. A person with Alzheimer's knows more than you may think; he knows when he is addressed in a respectful, caring way. Believe he still is a person inside and treat him with the respect and kindness you want for



yourself. Just put yourself in his position and the ways to reach out unfold.

### If someone in your family tree had Alzheimer's, will you get it, too?

Not necessarily. In a small percentage of the cases, there may be a genetic component that will increase the probability. However, having a loved one with Alzheimer's or having the gene does not necessarily mean you will get Alzheimer's.

### Is there anything you can do to prevent Alzheimer's?

Very little is known about how to prevent Alzheimer's but the latest belief is that certain practices may delay the onset and extend the time that a person can still function. A general guideline for maintaining a healthy brain is that if something is good for the heart, it's good for the brain. That means that nutritious meals and physical exercise are a must.

### Novelty stimulates the brain.

New brain cells are manufactured all the time, even with Alzheimer's, and like two year olds, these new brain cells need to be entertained by learning something completely new, whether it's Spanish or Tai Chi.

Keeping up ties with others is a crucial way to stave off Alzheimer's. Studies show a lower incidence of Alzheimer's among people who stay in contact with friends/family and join organizations.