**Coping with Dementia**
By Debbie Selsavage

***Alzheimer’s and dementia have become
the disease of our time.***

Previous eras in American history have been characterized by specific diseases. Influenza in the ‘20s, polio in the ‘30s and ‘40s, heart disease in the ‘50s, and then cancer. All of these, however, have been significantly suppressed or eliminated by modern medicines and medical therapies.

Today, based on a rapidly aging population and longer life-spans, dementia, in its various forms, is set to become our greatest medical and health care challenge for the foreseeable future.

The number of Americans with Alzheimer's disease [and dementia](http://health.usnews.com/health-news/patient-advice/articles/2015/06/19/caregiver-dementia-oh-yea-its-real) is projected to soar to 7.1 million by 2025; a 40 percent increase from the 5.1 million affected now. By 2050 it is projected that there will be 13.8 million sufferers. This threat is proportionately greater for Citrus County since we have almost double the Florida average for individuals over the age of 65!

What is even more sobering is that dementia, unlike the diseases mentioned in the opening paragraph, still has no cure or therapy for remission. It is progressive, irreversible, and fatal. While research continues to search for a cure, our only course of action is to provide better dementia care and awareness.

I was a caregiver for my late husband who was afflicted with Alzheimer’s for five years. It was a horrific experience. What I learned was that few professional caregivers really knew how to deal with someone with dementia. They were generally treated like cranky old people who refused to behave. The response was often to berate, manhandle, or abuse them, which will only make things worse.

And I found it near-impossible to get information or find resources that would help me as a caregiver. I still have fat files of letters and appeals for help that fell on the deaf ears of various agencies. Many remained unanswered, and one State Senator grasped the obvious by telling me I “should seek appropriate housing.”

Oddly, this bad experience eventually brought me into the elder care industry. I got a job as an administrative assistant in a memory care facility, then became an administrator with my own community. I was happy with the progress I made in improving care, but soon realized that I could reach only a limited number of victims and their caregivers while managing a single facility. The problem is huge, and my reach was minimal.

I quit, formed my own company – Coping with Dementia LLC – and became certified in the Positive Approach to Care, considered by many to be the gold standard of dementia care and the leading edge of a new philosophy of care based on a better understanding of how dementia affects its victims and how we can better respond to their needs with understanding. patience, and compassion.

Most people think Alzheimer’s and dementia are only about memory loss. This is not true. They cause many other physiological problems as well. They cause narrowing and loss of vision, degraded hearing and olfactory ability, loss of mental cognition, and loss of motor skills, eventually leading to death. To state it simply, with dementia the brain is irreversibly dying, affecting every aspect of one’s body.

We cannot just wring our hands and wait for a cure. Our only choice is to develop and adopt improved and more efficient standards of care, and to educate the public in a better understanding of this insidious disease.

Coping with Dementia LLC is dedicated to this task. We offer a range of training curricula for both lay and professional caregivers. We have training for businesses and civic organizations. We provide one-on-one counseling and host free caregiver discussion groups.

In the coming issues of *Citrus County Life*, I will try to provide the vital information we all need to know about Alzheimer’s and dementia, especially for those who are caregivers for a family member or loved one. Please send your questions to me at deb@coping.today, or go to our web site – [www.comping.today](http://www.comping.today) – where my blog and other articles offer advice and information.

Until next month, remember, we all deserve the best.