Insight

For people living with dementia

Alzheimer Society British Columbia

Winter 2026

There's no roadmap to dementia, but we can be your guide

January is Alzheimer's Awareness Month. This month, we want to ensure people affected by dementia know that they are not alone. We are sharing the experiences of people affected by dementia who have found meaning, connection and joy after a dementia diagnosis, in part by connecting with us.

People living with dementia and caregivers often feel overwhelmed after they receive a diagnosis and as the disease progresses. We want to make sure that people affected by the disease know we're available to listen and guide people to resources, education and support that can help them on their journey.

Get involved:

- Download the Community Partner Toolkit and share knowledge with your community.
- Raise awareness and fight stigma by sharing your personal experience through social media channels.
- Tell your friends and family to call the First Link® Dementia Helpline if they have questions about dementia.

To learn more about this year's Alzheimer's Awareness Month campaign, visit **alzbc.org/AlzheimersAwareness**.

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Warmest season's greetings

Don Cheeseman

I am writing to you from my home, "North of Sixty" in the Yukon. At 86 years old, I've had a long and fulfilling life. An aptitude for science and mathematics led me to a career in engineering, a passion I pursued and taught for many years on exciting projects in many countries.

While I am grateful for that life, the last three years have brought significant changes. I am experiencing a serious decline in my cognitive abilities, which makes each day a race against time. My goal is to live as fully as I can, while working to preserve my family's history and stories in e-books for future generations to find online.

The daily reality of this cognitive decline is frustrating. I have moments of sheer panic. People seem to talk faster than I can process their words; I can no longer follow sheet music and simple instructions can become jumbled. But I do not know that it has occurred. Hence, I have lost a lot of confidence in my accumulated knowledge and ability to assimilate and effectively use that knowledge. This development has eroded my patience with myself and, unfortunately, others as well, making social interaction difficult. In group settings, I often feel completely lost.

Consequently, I have become more isolated and find I am spending more time writing at my computer. It is a remarkably patient assistant. It repeats things endlessly without annoyance, corrects my slow and error-prone typing, and doesn't react to my outbreaks of frustration with my own limitations. It is available to me any time, day or night.

Of course, the burden of this journey falls most heavily on those closest to me (my loving wife and children), who must now take on the responsibilities I can no longer manage responsibly. In the face of these challenges, my wife and I have found renewed hope, support, and camaraderie through the Alzheimer Society of B.C. Their Helpline, publications and webinars are a vital reminder that we take this journey with many others, each with their own unique story.

– Don Cheeseman, person living with dementia

Read Don's poem, *Whitehorse Winter Solstice* on **page 7**.

Alzheimer's Awareness Month: Mark Breslaw's story

Mark Breslaw lives in South Surrey with his wife Shonna and youngest son Michael, a community they love for its accessibility and amenities. Living with young-onset Alzheimer's disease at 49 years old, he enjoys walking at the beach, something that has become more common since his diagnosis.

In 2023, Mark found himself increasingly forgetting names. Tasks that came naturally became inexplicable difficult. Then he got lost while driving home from work. Mark knew something was wrong but didn't suspect dementia.

"I attributed it to stress, a demanding job, and raising a family. But when I got lost again, I decided to see my doctor.

Cognitive assessments in February 2024, followed by months of tests led Mark's medical team to suspect Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) or dementia. Eager to learn more, Mark called the Alzheimer Society of B.C.

"I had no idea what I was going to get when I called the First Link® Dementia Helpline," Mark says. "They were so welcoming. I still didn't have a formal diagnosis, but no one said, 'Only call us when it gets to this point.' It was the first piece of validation after what felt like a months-long information void."

A cerebral spinal fluid test confirmed Mark's diagnosis of younger-onset Alzheimer's disease in early 2025. Mark chose to step away from his position as Senior Director, Human Resources with Electronic Arts for the foreseeable future. While Mark never imagined stepping back so early, he made the decision to not just accept reality as it is, but to thrive, not in spite of, but actively with dementia.

Attending a lived experience webinar featuring other people living with younger-onset dementia, Mark's eyes were opened to a new world of possibilities.

"I'm listening to the speaker, thinking 'Maybe there's a role where I can educate, advocate and continue to do some of the things I loved about my job.'"

Mark joined the Lived Experience Partner Program, inspired to find new ways to use his voice, fight stigma and raise awareness.

While Mark's positive outlook may be a benefit to him as he navigates dementia, his drive to fight stigma and ability to inspire are gifts, both to the Society and to anyone else on the dementia journey.

January is Alzheimer's Awareness Month. We are sharing the experiences of people like Mark, who have found meaning, connection and joy after a dementia diagnosis, in part by connecting with us. Learn more at **alzbc.org/AlzheimersAwareness**.

First Link® dementia support after a diagnosis

After receiving a diagnosis, it's common not to know where to begin. Whether you want to learn more about the programs and services we offer or find dementia-related information specific to your needs, First Link® dementia support connects you to services, education, and information as early as possible after diagnosis and throughout the progression of the disease.

Meet Rana and Dev

Dev began noticing changes in his wife Rana – memory loss, confusion about dates, mixing up words, increased agitation and disorientation when they were out together. Concerned, they visited their family doctor and were referred to a geriatrician for further assessment.

Rana was diagnosed with early-stage dementia. With their permission, the geriatrician referred them to the Alzheimer Society of B.C. A Support and Education Coordinator reached out to introduce our services and answer any questions.

Since then, they've received regular follow-up calls and have become frequent attendees of our free Webinar Wednesday sessions, held weekly at 2 p.m. PST. Rana has also joined a local Coffee and Chat group, a social program available in-person and online, designed to help people affected by dementia meet new people, engage, in social activities and have fun!

Meet Pat and Sandra

Sandra is in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. She and her partner Pat began attending Minds in Motion®, a fitness and social program for people living with dementia and their care partners.

From their positive experience, they joined support groups. Sandra joined an early-stage group for people living with dementia and Pat has joined the 2SLGBTQIA+ caregiver support group. Sandra's group discussed coping abilities and strategies for maintaining independence, and Sandra feels she has regained some control in the face of a challenging diagnosis.

For online education and in-person regional dementia support available in your area, visit **alzbc.org/dementia-programs**.

To subscribe to your monthly copy of our programs and services, visit **alzbc.org/subscribe**.

More than a call: The research behind helplines

No matter where you are in the progression of dementia, it's normal to feel uncertain about what comes next. The First Link® Dementia Helpline is a valuable resource for anyone affected by dementia. Whether you're living with the disease, caring for someone who is, working in health care or simply interested in learning how to offer support, a single call can make a meaningful difference. Helpline staff are here to listen and offer practical support when it's needed most, connecting callers with local programs, services and resources.

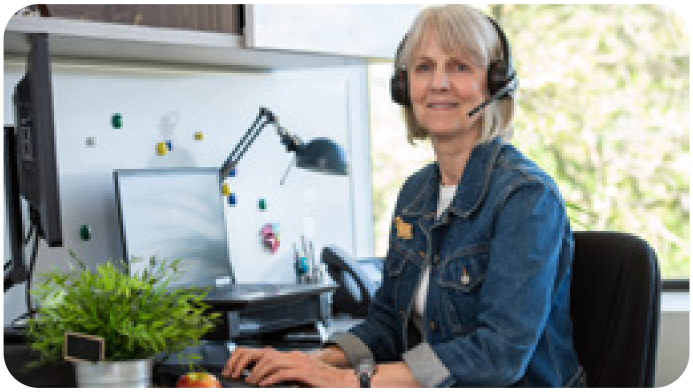
A trusted community resource

At the Alzheimer Society of B.C., our First Link® Dementia Helpline is a trusted source of support, not only for people affected by dementia, but also for health-care providers. In 2022, researchers from the University of British Columbia analyzed feedback from more than 1,100 surveys to learn more about the program's impact. Many doctors and nurses refer their clients to the Helpline. The study found that 91 per cent of these providers were satisfied with the support their clients received, and 82 per cent agreed it helped lower their clients' stress.

Research conducted by the Alzheimer's Association in the United States noted a similar impact. researchers analyzed nearly 500 post-call surveys and found that people reported significant benefits after just one call – including improved emotional well-being, better ability to manage emotions, and a greater likelihood of accessing services they hadn't known about before. More than 80 per cent of callers found the practical steps discussed during the call helpful.

Helpline operators act as a bridge, connecting people affected by dementia with information, education and services, as early as possible after diagnosis and throughout the progression of the disease. No one has to face dementia alone.

Trained staff at the Alzheimer Society of B.C. are ready to listen and provide information. They understand that every person's story is unique and will work with you to identify actionable next steps.



If you have questions about Alzheimer's disease or other dementias, call the Alzheimer Society of B.C.'s First Link® Dementia Helpline for information and support. Learn more at **alzbc.org/FLDHL**.

Telling your family and friends about a dementia diagnosis

Sharing a dementia diagnosis can feel daunting, but people find many different ways to tell the important people in their lives.

There is ample discussion about receiving a dementia diagnosis from a doctor or nurse practitioner and the challenges in ruling out other possibilities diagnosis but much less on how to share that diagnosis with the people in your life – even though it's a question facing everyone.

How have you told family and friends about the dementia diagnosis received by the person you care for? Did you:

- Call a family meeting on Zoom?
- Share the news in one-on-one meetings?
- Tell friends and family in a written message?

We're curious about how people living with dementia and their care partners are handling this. A couple of suggestions have emerged:

- Use person-centred language to preserve the dignity of the person with the diagnosis, available on the Alzheimer Society of Canada's website at **alzbc.org/asc-language**.
- Prepare to respond to misconceptions about dementia that might arise. Many people believe dementia is strictly genetic. It's not. Read more at **alzbc.org/genetic-testing**.

Other people think dementia is a normal part of aging. It's true that age is the biggest risk factor, but many people live well into their 80s, 90s and beyond with no signs of dementia. At the same time, younger people, even in their 30s and 40s, can develop dementia – although this is rare.

Dementia is caused by diseases that cause abnormal changes to brain cells, like Alzheimer's disease, vascular disease, Lewy body disease, and frontotemporal disorders. Our website has information that will help you to prepare for questions from friends and families, available at **alzbc.org/myths-realities**.

We'd like to know how people are telling friends and family about a dementia diagnosis. With your permission, we'll include your ideas in an upcoming article. Email us and we'll reach out to you: **dementiaeducation@alzheimerbc.org**.

The 2025 World Alzheimer Report explores possibilities for improving quality of life and independence for people living with dementia and their care partners. Read the report at **alzbc.org/adi25**.

Ask us anything

We asked people living with dementia or mild cognitive impairment (MCI) to talk about sharing their diagnosis.

How did you share your diagnosis with friends and family?

"I have been very purposeful in how I share it. I started with immediate family. My wife and I sent initial information via text and told everyone we would provide more detail as we digested it. This allowed us the space to breath while still having our families informed." – Mark, person living with dementia.

"I used social media, text messages and phone calls to old friends and family members. I have nothing to hide, but I did want to give them a heads-up about me being perhaps different than they may have remembered me." – Fred, person living with MCI.

"My mother and three of my seven older siblings were diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease before me. I had no problem just openly sharing with my wife and children and my remaining older siblings and I don't think they were surprised. [Dementia] has just been part of my life for years." – Art, person living with dementia.

How did people react to the news?

"The most humbling part was that independently of one another, people spoke of being there for us, but more particularly, that they were here for all of it, for the journey. It meant so much to me personally that even when I am unable, we have a whole community of people who will support, lift up and walk along side my family as they may need. it." – Mark

Whitehorse Winter Solstice, by Don Cheeseman

The sun rose after ten today
In our valley home below,
Past my front door, where black pines reach
Into the vast and cobalt glow.
I stand upon the Yukon's shore,
The moonlight on the snow is stark.
The mountains watch in silent awe,
A stillness breathing in the dark.
It's broken by a raven's cry,
Whose flight defies the bitter cold.
There's life within this darkest time,
A richer prize than panned-for gold.
For overhead, in green and red,
The Northern Lights flow and fold.
I am content with my small lot,
And wait for March when sun grows bold.
A sight like this can ease my aches,
My weary pains, my hidden scars.
If the Lord is willing and the pine box waits,
I'll see again the cold, the colours, and the stars.

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- Subscribe online at **alzbc.org/insight-newsletter**
- Call 604-681-6530 or toll-free 1-800-667-3742

Contribute

We welcome contributions, such as personal stories, photography or original poems, from people living with dementia. Please provide your name, mailing address, phone number and/or email address if you would like to be contacted. All submissions will be considered based on theme and space.

- Email **insight@alzheimerbc.org**
- Call 604-681-6530 or toll-free 1-800-667-3742
- Mail to the Alzheimer Society of B.C., care of *Insight*:
  300-828 West 8th Avenue
  Vancouver, B.C. V5Z 1E2

Call the First Link® Dementia Helpline

A confidential, province-wide support and information service for anyone with questions about dementia. Our Helpline is available from Monday to Friday.

- English: 1-800-936-6033
  (9 a.m. – 8 p.m.)
- Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu: 1-833-674-5003
  (9 a.m. – 4 p.m.)
- Cantonese or Mandarin: 1-833-674-5007
  (9 a.m. – 4 p.m.)

  Email **info.helpline@alzheimerbc.org**

Are you a caregiver?

Connections is a quarterly print and digital publication produced by the Alzheimer Society of B.C.

To subscribe:

- Visit our website at **alzbc.org/connections-newsletter**
- Call 604-681-6530 or toll-free 1-800-667-3742

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