

Lana Cook Discusses Distinguishing Delirium From Dementia

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My name's Lana Cook. I'm a registered nurse and I'm going to chat about the differences between delirium and dementia.

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The symptoms for delirium and dementia overlaps, so they can often be mistaken for one another, particularly when someone with dementia is also experiencing delirium. Both cause confusion, disorientation, and disturbed cognition. However, there are some key differences that you should know about because the management and care provided to each is very different.

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Delirium has a rapid onset with a fluctuating course and delirium. Dementia, in contrast, has a slower, more progressive journey, with cognitive functions declining over time. So you could think of

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delirium is being like a sudden storm that hits quickly and it impacts on a person's cognitive functions.

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It can manifest in

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all those symptoms like disorientation and attention, confusion, sudden mood swings or even hallucinations. Whereas a dementia has a more gradual onset and would affect people's memory and cognitive functions like their ability to find the right words to say or to recognise objects and can affect people's vision as well.

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So it has a slower journey. I think of dementia more like a smouldering fire that gradually consumes people's cognitive functions over time.

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Another key difference that you can look out for is the level of consciousness. So delirium can affect someone's level of consciousness, whereas that is not so common with dementia. So when assessing your patient, you might notice that there's changes in their level of alertness and their awareness of their surroundings which can change over the course of the day. Whereas someone with dementia does tend to hold on to their consciousness until more

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delirious stages.

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Another difference to look out for is that fluctuating course that you'll find with delirium. When we talk about the fluctuating course of delirium, we mean that their symptoms can seem to improve and then get worse again over the course of hours and days, whereas dementia has a more slow and progressive decline. So if you think about delirium like that's in storm that

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then A can blue in and out quickly if the underlying causes are addressed.

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Dementia is more like the changing of the seasons.

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Last thing to know about the differences between the two of them is the reversibility. So if you do address some of the underlying causes of delirium and via a medication reaction or an infection, then if you've caught it early enough and treated it appropriately, those symptoms should reverse. However, with dementia, there is no known cure for the underlying causes, so you can't reverse

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dementia.

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So in summary, with Delerium you're looking at for a rapid sudden onset with a fluctuating course versus dementias. Slower and more progressive decline over time and look out for changes in consciousness and levels of awareness in your patients as well.