

TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Alzheimers: A Crash Course for Friends and Relatives, by Mary Cail

1. Have you faced a difficult experience when your friends didn't know how to help or what to say?
2. Have you ever been unable to understand what a friend was going through because you had not shared a similar experience? How did you handle it?
3. Are we ready as a culture to hear a message of inclusivity and friendship for people with dementia or are we too afraid of the condition?
4. In the early-stage story (pp. 19–27), Adelle's husband gives a "dramatic example of love and humanity" (p. 24). What do you think makes a person able to put aside his or her needs and frustrations and go the distance as a caregiver, often for a period of many years?
5. Chapter 2 begins with a list of things not to say to someone in early-stage Alzheimer's disease. Do you agree with this list, and can you add any items to it?
6. Are there strategies in chapters 2 and 3 that apply to all of our close relationships, not just friendships with Alzheimer's patients and caregivers?
7. Based on your experience, which of the strategies in these chapters are the most important to remember and put into practice?
8. Cathryn (chapter 4) is unable to cope with Neal due to her health and his physical size, personality changes, and level of decline. The chapter opens with a quote from Cathryn: "We all agree in support group that the marriage ends" (p. 59). Is this true? What are the differences between marriage and friendship that might allow friendship to survive dementia, if marriage cannot?
9. The author recommends that we accept what a person in mid-stage says and perceives without correcting facts or arguing. How hard is this to do? What makes it hard?

10. Chapter 5 provides a communication toolkit for helping a friend with mid-stage Alzheimer's. How must we redefine our concept of friendship to allow for the relational problems AD causes?
11. Consider the strategies in chapter 6 for helping a mid-stage caregiver. Are each of these strategies relevant in friendships, no matter what the circumstances? Can you think of an example of when a friend gave you advice you didn't want to hear, or inadvertently made a difficult situation worse by being insensitive? Have you been guilty of this yourself?
12. Velma's story (chapter 7) isn't altogether negative and sad. What makes it bittersweet?
13. Consider this quote from chapter 8: "A disease can change the way the future will play out. It cannot change the past" (p. 104), encouraging us not to lose track of the things we've loved about a person all along. What are some ways we can keep a friend or loved one's dementia from overriding our own good memories?
14. The subtitle of one of the strategies for helping a late-stage caregiver is *Tend to the Tears* (p.113). Why are we so uncomfortable when a person cries, or are we?
15. The author briefly discusses her conception of grief (pp. 117–18). What do you think of the analogy she uses to describe grief? When you've grieved, what helped you feel better? How long did grief go on for you?
16. Bert says his love for his wife "continues but with a changed circumstance" (p. 128). Can friendship with a person suffering from dementia continue but with a changed circumstance?
17. Page 136 has a tongue-in-cheek, how-not-to-write-it letter the author confesses was based on one she actually received from a friend. Have you had an experience in which a friend made an unhappy circumstance in your life seem even worse by bragging?
18. Which of the suggestions in chapter 11, *Seven Ways to Stay Connected*, would be the easiest for you to do as a friend or to accept as a caregiver?

19. In chapter 12, *The Dinner Party*, the author hosts a party attended by a woman, Elaine, then in mid-to-late stage AD, and her caregiving husband. Several of the people she invited, she says, declined when they realized Elaine would be among the guests. Why do we have such a difficult time accepting other people's challenges or differences and responding compassionately?

20. This book was written for friends, from the perspective of a friend. The strategies and suggestions are meant to be relatively easy and realistic for a busy friend with limited time. The author does not include helping with the more intimate, difficult acts of caregiving for this reason. The book is not meant to portray how terrible Alzheimer's disease can be under certain circumstances but rather to encourage people not to abandon (in fear or awkwardness) the friends and loved ones who struggle with it. Do you think she accomplished her purpose—to create a guide for the All-Weather Friend? Why or why not?

21. In the epilogue, the author relates a true story about a man who demonstrated an inexplicable understanding of an event he could not possibly have witnessed. The brain has been described by other writers as the transmitter (“the television set”) of a greater consciousness which remains intact—but can no longer be perceived, due to the broken transmitter or failed mind. What do you think of this idea?

22. Do you think people fear that Alzheimer's disease is contagious (see note 31, p. 177)? Is this fear rational?

23. What does *Terminus* by Ralph Waldo Emerson (p. 201–02) say about how Emerson regarded his worsening dementia? What lessons can we find in the poem?

24. Do you have a true All-Weather Friend in your life? How rare is this kind of friend in the present day and age, in which self-sufficiency and busyness are prized, and social media has become a main way connecting?