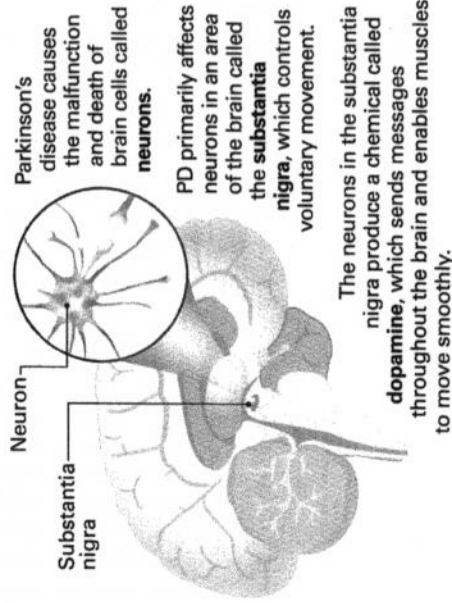
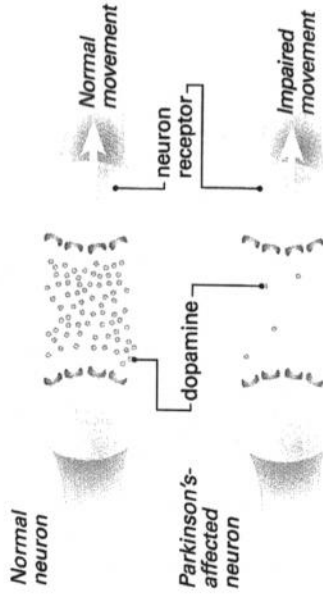


Understanding Parkinson's Disease

As many as one million Americans are affected by Parkinson's Disease, a chronic movement disorder of which the cause is unknown. To care for someone with PD, it's important to understand what's going on within the body.



PD attacks these dopamine-producing neurons, impairing the brain's ability to send messages and control movement.



Source: Parkinson's Disease Foundation, www.pdf.org/health/howstuffworks.com

By Jessica Smith

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According to the Parkinson's Disease Foundation, the average age for being diagnosed with Parkinson's is 57, and risk increases with age. But diagnoses in people from ages 30 to 80 are not unheard of.

"We knew that there were strange things going on," Katherine says of the time before David's diagnosis. For example, a year before he was diagnosed, David showed disturbing symptoms when giving a speech. Katherine noticed David's visible nervousness, his word-finding problems, and his repetition of certain words.

"This was blatant, in our faces," she says. The incident made the couple seek out a neurologist.

"David was actually relieved when he heard it was Parkinson's because he thought he was losing his

mind," Katherine says. "I, however, had no idea what to do next and no direction."

FINDING SUPPORT

A friend of Katherine's referred her to the non-profit Parkinson Support Center of Kentuckiana (PSCKY), whose mission, according to executive director Cliff Whalin, is to promote an improved quality of life for those living with Parkinson's disease in this community. The PSCKY offers regular services such as music therapy and exercise classes, support groups for people with Parkinson's, and support groups for care partners of those with the disease.

The PSCKY also hosts an annual Living Well Symposium, where people with Parkinson's and their family and friends hear speakers, visit vendor booths, and network. The day-long event covers topics including services, technologies, lifestyle choices, and current medical research that can improve quality of life. This year's symposium will take place October 29 at the UofL Shelbyhurst Campus.

The PSCKY support group was especially helpful for Katherine.

"Most of what I learned, I got from the support group members whose loved ones had Parkinson's disease for longer than my husband," she says. "They've been there and developed their own system for living with this, and then they taught it to us."

CARING FOR PARKINSON'S

Caring for a person with Parkinson's can be challenging. In addition to taking care of physical needs, care partners also provide emotional support and empathy.

"From an emotional stand-

point, a positive attitude really means a lot when you're dealing with this disease, so a person needs encouragement and hope," says Cliff Whalin, director of the PSCKY. "They also need to maintain social interaction. People will oftentimes isolate themselves, which is one of the worst things they can do."

In addition, exercise has been clinically proven to slow the progression of the disease, Whalin says. Speech therapy is important too because Parkinson's affects vocal cords and can make a person's voice too soft to hear. The PSCKY offers classes on exercise, dance, and music therapy to strengthen class participants.

More resources for help with Parkinson's:

Parkinson's Disease Foundation
www.pdf.org

National Parkinson Foundation
www.parkinson.org

The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research
www.michaeljfox.org

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"Parkinson's can reduce your life and make you small: it can make your voice smaller, your movements smaller, even your handwriting smaller," Whalin says. "We tell people to use your social circle to fight that. They can live a quality life for many, many years."

Katherine adds that she now has a different perspective on the everyday challenges a person with Parkinson's faces.

"Everything slows down," she says. "David shuf-

fling at your medicine regimen and changing it up," Katherine adds.

Katherine asserts that when it comes to caring for someone with Parkinson's, there is no such thing as a typical day. She tries to think of ways to make her husband's life easier: "Something simple can make a huge difference, such as buying T-shirts that are an extra size too large and stretchy jogging pants that don't have buttons or zippers," she says.

She also knows how to avoid isolation by adjusting activities. For example, David couldn't get

comfortable at the movie theater, so they improvised by renting a movie and inviting friends to watch. Katherine has also learned that stress leads to more symptoms, so she and David strive to communicate effectively.

It's also important to remember that the caregiver of a person with Parkinson's has critical needs. Whalin says the two biggest needs of a caregiver are support and personal breaks.

"Make sure that you take care of yourself and make time for yourself," Whalin advises. "If you're in the four walls taking care of [your loved one] all the time, then you wear yourself out. When that happens, you can't take care of them. You can't give what you don't have."

LIVING A FULL LIFE

For people with Parkinson's and their loved ones, Katherine wants to impart some words of wisdom: "Enjoy your time together."

She adds, "If you want to travel, and you feel up to it, then travel. If you want to see friends, find a way to see them. Also, although someone might not be doing well right now, with the right combination of medications, they can have a better quality of life."

Katherine brags that David just finished writing a book. "He's a writer, and the one thing he loves to write most is poetry; in fact, he just won a national poetry award," she says. "The [positivity] of his life and what he brings to [our family] is unbelievable. He's such an inspiration to me." ■



"PARKINSON'S CAN MAKE YOU SMALL. IT CAN MAKE YOUR VOICE SMALLER, YOUR MOVEMENTS SMALLER, EVEN YOUR HANDWRITING SMALLER. USE YOUR SOCIAL CIRCLE TO FIGHT THAT."

fles, he leans over — I have to constantly pull his shoulders back and say, 'Stand up straight, babe.' They think that they're standing up straight, but they're not."

David also gets "frozen," as most people with Parkinson's are prone to do. "Their brain isn't sending the correct signals, and they can't move their arms and legs," Katherine says. "They're just stuck." Medication helps, but Katherine says it's complicated. "Treating Parkinson's is like putting puzzle pieces together," she says. "You try until it works."

Medication or a combination of medications might work for a while, but because Parkinson's is a progressive disease, the effects of medication might fade with time. It's important to keep look-