

What it's like to have dementia



[Donna Vickroy](#) **Contact Reporter**

'The saddest thing is that society kind of turns a blind eye to people with dementia'

Your vision is blurred by darkness, shadows and out-of-focus images. Your hearing is obscured by static, sirens and slamming doors.

Your sense of touch is curtailed, thanks to big bulky gloves. And inside your shoes are small plastic spikes making you painfully cognizant of every step you take.

You are on a virtual [dementia](#) tour. With your senses diminished or painfully heightened, you have three minutes to complete five seemingly simple tasks.

You may walk in circles, swipe at unfamiliar objects and knock over things. You may talk to yourself or panic or even cry out for help. You will surely be relieved when it's over.

And almost certainly, you will not complete all, if any, of the tasks.

Lucky for you, this is only a tour.

On a recent Saturday morning, curious men and women lined up inside Hope Covenant Church in Orland Park to experience for a few minutes what dementia patients go through all day long.

"We're not trying to scare people," said Aishling Dalton-Kelly, who owns Aishling Companion Home Care in Orland Park. "We're just trying to give them a sense of what these people go through on a daily basis. Why they have a hard time opening things, finding things, what life is like for them."



Northbrook care provider launches memory program

The goggles, gloves, shoe inserts and headphones are meant to create sensations that mimic some of the symptoms of dementia.

Dalton-Kelly said the virtual experience offers a glimmer into the world of memory loss coupled with other common ailments of aging, including neuropathy, macular degeneration and hearing loss.

The sensitivity training is designed to help those who go through it become better caregivers, friends and benefactors of those afflicted. And the number of those afflicted is rising.

New statistics from the Alzheimer's Association (alz.org) project that by 2050 the number of people diagnosed with Alzheimer's, the most common form of dementia, will go from 5.1 million to 7.1 million.

Alzheimer's, which primarily affects women, is the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States, according to the association.

Dalton-Kelly said the bulk of her client base is senior citizens, many of whom have some form of dementia. With the baby boomers reaching retirement age, she said, dementia has the potential to cripple the health care system in this country.



La Grange Park firefighters experience challenges of aging

As hard as life is for the person who has dementia, Dalton-Kelly said, it is worse for the caregiver.

"There is no break," she said, there's very little help and most expenses are out of pocket.

"The saddest thing," she said, "is that society kind of turns a blind eye to people with dementia because they don't know how to handle it. They're embarrassed and don't know how to offer help. Spouses and family members are embarrassed. So they start to become isolated.

"I run a support group here at this church, and spouses will come in and say, 'We don't have any friends, we don't have anyone we can call to help.'"

Dalton-Kelly pairs with Tami Neumann, a certified dementia practitioner and instructor at Prairie State College who's also the host of the Conversations in Care radio program, to offer the free dementia tour several times a year.

Neumann has been offering the tour for more than three years. She said increasing understanding among policymakers, first responders and the population in general is the first step toward helping people with the disease.

"It's really imperative that we find a cure or a way of coping and treating families and looking after these people," she said.

Among this morning's tour takers — Carolyn and Jim Blascheck, both 31, of Orland Park; and Meloney Estelle, 19, her boyfriend, James Briscoe, and his mom, Brenda Briscoe, all from Channahon.

"I had two grandparents with Alzheimer's," Carolyn said. "I want to understand what people with dementia go through."

"My parents saw their parents deal with it," Jim said. "My dad is 67 and he's writing everything down. He doesn't think he has dementia, but just in case he's writing down all his wishes."

Estelle is enrolled in a certified nurse assistant class where she said she will be "working with people who have dementia so I decided to come and see what it's like."

Afterward, Carolyn said, "I was very, very lost. Knowing it was only three minutes helped me think I could just ride this out. If that was your permanent state, I could only imagine that the frustration would continue to grow and grow."

Neumann said through her company, Silver Dawn Senior Friendly Cities, she and partner Catherine Braxton are also working with local towns to help their rescue personnel recognize signs of dementia and better deal with patients they encounter.

Blue Island is in the process of becoming the first city in Illinois to become certified as a Senior Friendly City.

"We focus on a social model, not structure," Neumann said. "The fire department has gone through it, we're getting ready to put the police department through it. It teaches them what to do when they encounter a person with dementia.

"We want everybody in a community to have the same common language and to know, 'if I find someone who might be lost and is a senior, what do I do.'"

Blue Island Ald. Candace Carr, 4th Ward, said the city has a relatively high senior population, so she thought it could benefit from such training. Because Blue Island is among a few communities signed up in the pilot program, the service is free, Carr said.

She said among those expected to use the training are health care workers, park district employees and business owners and their employees.

"A lot of people take the training because they want to be able to recognize the condition and know how to handle it," she said.

"I took it," Carr said. "It helps you understand the difference between normal aging and dementia, and most important, it teaches you how to interact with people who have dementia, who might be in an agitated state."

To learn more about Silver Dawn Senior Friendly Cities, visit silverdawnsfc.com

To learn more about Aishling Companion Home Care, call 708-728-5538 or visit aishlingcare.com

To learn more about dementia and Alzheimer's, including the 10 warning signs, visit alz.org

dvickroy@tribpub.com

Copyright © 2016, [Daily Southtown](#)