

'MY HUSBAND HAS TURNED INTO A STRANGER' - AND OUR FRIENDS HAVE ABANDONED US'

One in 14 people over 65, and one in six people over 80, has a form of dementia. Viv Galley, 63, from Stockport, cares for her husband Bill, 70, and explains how Alzheimer's is destroying *both* their lives



Bill and Viv on their wedding day

When I married my Bill 13 years ago it was the second time for both of us. I was divorced, he was a widower and together we had the perfect marriage. He was kind, funny and doted on his 'adopted' grandchildren.

We never stopped laughing, enjoyed regular trips to the Greek Islands and romantic weekends away, and spent hours plotting what we'd do with our retirement.

Five years ago, Bill retired from his job as site manager for Manchester City Council and I was planning to cut down my hours at the local health centre where I was a receptionist. We looked forward to being happy together for the rest of our lives, it didn't dawn on us Alzheimer's was waiting to tear our lives apart.

I first noticed things weren't right three years ago, just before my 60th birthday. The children had to abandon a surprise party for me because Bill couldn't grasp the idea. Then he started doing silly things like putting teabags in the sugar bowl.

I tried to convince myself it was just part of getting older, but when he started forgetting where we were going as soon as he got behind the wheel of our car on trips he'd done hundreds of times before, I knew something was very wrong.

Terrified, I took Bill to our GP who did some simple memory tests before referring us to the local hospital. Over the course of a year we saw four different doctors who all did the same tests but came to no conclusion. I was at my wits' end and thought we were wasting time when he could have been on medication.

Finally a professor diagnosed Alzheimer's. Bill was prescribed drugs to stop the progression of the disease and that was that. During that time, his deterioration had been rapid. We had to stop him driving and he started talking as if he was drunk. He got more forgetful and couldn't remember our

granddaughters' names. When we came out of the hospital after getting the diagnosis I sat in the car crying my eyes out for an hour. Hearing the word Alzheimer's was like someone had punched me in the stomach.

Bill just kept saying, 'What's wrong?' It was as if he thought he was going to take some tablets and it would go. If only. From that day on, it felt as if we were cast adrift, completely on our own - no advice, no contact with health professionals and no idea of what to expect.

RAPID DETERIORATION

Since then I've seen Bill go downhill so fast, and become a man I don't recognise. He's lost all power of communication: he just comes out with gobbledygook. Sometimes he'll suddenly burst out laughing and that really hurts me. In his mind he is making sense and obviously something has tickled him, but he can't share it with me.

He's so bad now that he can't dress

himself or go to the toilet and he can barely walk without holding on to the walls. A carer has to come in each morning for an hour to give him a shower because he was lashing out at me in frustration when I did it.

I've got a lump on my face now from where he hit me. My daughters - who come over every day - worry he will really hurt me, but I've got to know the signs of when he's getting agitated and I just back off until he calms down.

The irony is most of the time Bill is happy in his own little world and he's well looked after. It's us who are suffering, watching him fall apart.

The darkest time for me is when we're just alone. There is no conversation and I have to watch him constantly because he's so unpredictable.

Even popping to the shops is out of the question. I feel so isolated, like a prisoner in my own home. When he's at the day centre at weekends my treat is a long soak in the bath. Pure heaven.

I have come to terms with the horrible reality that things will only get worse. But what I haven't come to terms with is that all our good friends have completely

difficult now to hold him up.

Even though Bill has to use a wheelchair we've managed some great days out with the group, like visits to the seaside.

Last year I was really touched when he suddenly gave me this little heart ornament saying 'I love you' that he'd bought on one of our days out. I really had to choke back the tears.

Day to day it's like grieving for someone who's still here. And every day, a little bit more of the man I used to know disappears.

One nice thing though is that he is always kissing me in public, which he never used to do and thankfully he still recognises me, although he thinks I'm his mum sometimes.

People ask me if I'm still in love with Bill and, although he's not the man I married, I really am. I love him to bits. When I feel I can't cope any more I just look at old pictures to remind myself of good times. Even though there will come a time when he will no longer recognise me and be a total stranger living in my house, the only thing that scares me more is him not being here at all.

abandoned us. Every single one of them just disappeared the minute Bill was diagnosed. That hurt so much I used to sit and sob [my heart out]. But now I'm just angry at how insensitive they've been.

At least through the Alzheimer's Society we've made a whole new set of lovely, genuine friends, it's like having a second family.

We go the society's lunch groups every week, and I'll even try to have a little dance with Bill, although it's

What is dementia?

● The term 'dementia' is used to describe a set of symptoms that may include memory loss and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language.

These changes are often small to start with, but for someone with dementia they have become severe enough to affect daily life. A person with dementia may also experience changes in their mood or behaviour.

● Dementia is caused when the brain is damaged by disease such as Alzheimer's or a series of strokes. Alzheimer's is the most common cause of dementia.

Who gets dementia?

● There are about 800,000 men and women in the UK with dementia. It mainly affects people over the age of 65 and the likelihood of developing dementia increases significantly with age. However, it can affect younger people: there are at least 17,000 people in the UK who developed dementia before they were 65.

What should I do if I am worried about my memory?

If you are worried about your memory, seek advice from your GP. They will listen to your concerns and possibly arrange for further investigation. You may be referred to a local memory clinic or hospital specialist for an assessment. The earlier you seek help, the sooner you can get information, advice and support.

Further info:

● Alzheimer's Society research shows that in less than 10 years a million people in the UK will be living with dementia. This will soar to 1.7 million people by 2051.

● There are an estimated 670,000 primary carers of people with dementia in the UK.

● To connect with others who are affected by memory problems, visit the Alzheimer's Society's online discussion forum, Talking Point, at alzheimers.org.uk/talkingpoint. Or call the Alzheimer's Society National Dementia Helpline on 0300 222 1122.