

# Alzheimer's

by Pamela S. Rivers



If someone had said to me years ago that I'd find myself advocating for caregivers and Alzheimer's, I would have told them that I couldn't see it, but as I've learned you never know what you may be called to do.



Alzheimer's is a growing epidemic. Every 66 seconds someone is diagnosed. Many believe the momentum for awareness is slow because of the stigma from a lack of understanding and the symptoms of the disease; memory, reasoning, and cognitive function loss. Women find themselves at the epicenter of this crisis, not only because of their increased risk of getting it, but they make up two-thirds of all caregivers caring for those with Alzheimer's or dementia. This fact was my truth.

My mother had Alzheimer's. Not knowing where to turn or what to do and doing it alone, I became an unexpected caregiver. When my mother started showing signs of forgetfulness in 2006, a light bulb went off. My maternal grandmother had it when I was younger which led me to encourage her to get checked out. But she would brush it off as being forgetful and I guess I brushed it off too hoping that it was her being forgetful.

Some years later after a job downsizing and a move to another state some years later, my mother declined faster than expected. But then again, I didn't know what to expect. It's known that a change of environment can trigger behavior changes and though my mom had a mild temperament and thankfully wasn't a wanderer, she had her moments of being agitated and uncooperative. I knew she couldn't stop the changes that were happening to her and as a caregiver you walk a fine line of dealing with behavioral symptoms while needing to remember that this person still matters.

It took some time, but I learned in order to have a measure of success in caring for my mom, I needed to be proactive instead of reactive and learn what I call the language of Alzheimer's, how to communicate her way and not my way.

While in my infancy of caregiving, a few things happened. First I was putting my health concerns to the side and after two bouts of bronchitis; I needed to get on a better health and fitness track in order to be my best functioning self. Second my family and friends encouraged me to start blogging about my experiences. You could only imagine what I thought? No thank you. But I started looking at the bigger picture. Perhaps writing about my journey could help someone else.

Yes, there were many raw moments, but there were also times later when I could laugh, especially when I needed to use my ingenuity and so Confessions of a Master Caregiver was born. Was I a master at being a caregiver? No, but they say "if you think it, you become it."

I lost my mom in 2012 and though I would do anything to have her back, I know my time as a former caregiver allows me to be stronger in my ability to affect change.

As a woman of color I am using my voice to encourage African-Americans and other people of color to go for wellness checks because we have a greater risk for developing Alzheimer's due to hypertension and diabetes. And as a daughter, I am using my voice to end the stigma, raise awareness, and advocate for more support and research.

## Alzheimer's by the numbers

**5.4 million** Americans have Alzheimer's—double the number since 1980. One million are African Americans

**16 million** are expected to have Alzheimer's by 2050

**Sixth** leading cause of death among all adults. It's the 4th leading cause of death for older African Americans

Alzheimer's is not a normal part of aging.

Alzheimer's has no current cure, but treatments for symptoms are available and research continues.