

# The Dementia Series

## - Dementia and Beyond



I think most of us have grown up with the idea that growing old means going gaga. I can remember visiting elderly people in hospital and long term care and that image of the 'senile older person' is pretty hard to forget. We can all be forgiven for assuming that old age and senility go hand in hand. The reality is that this sector of the population is much smaller than we may believe. We tend to see large concentrations of elderly people with cognitive deficits in certain situations but we don't see the large numbers of people who still live independently in their own homes. But regardless of any assumptions we may have made, so many of those elderly people with cognitive deficits have a condition that is completely treatable. The truth is that for any of us who are finding ourselves losing our cognitive edge

*It simply does not need to be this way!*

My experience is that the world tends to be full of well-meaning people, who are doing the best that they can; however, that doesn't mean that the people in their care are actually getting access to the best treatments. I continue to find that the standard of care in long term care facilities (especially in Australasia), could be dramatically improved upon. Many of the unfortunate things that are done, are done out of ignorance. When people know better, they end to provide a better level of care and we should be constantly challenging the basic assumptions being made, such as cognitive decline being inevitable as we age.

Over the years, I have done a lot of work in long term care and my view was always that someone could easily be there for 10 or 15 years or maybe longer. Sitting back and 'letting nature take its course'; was never an option for me. I have always believed that people deserve the best, no matter who they are, and this always goes doubly so for the elderly; primarily because they often find themselves in situations where their decision making has been drastically reduced. I am certainly not one who buys into the 'ambulance at the bottom of the

cliff' mentality, especially when I know that so much can be done to improve upon the function and well-being of so many.

The focus in science may well be on find a magic pill to 'fix' cognitive deficits but I find there is an astounding lack of understanding of the function of cognitive performance permeating the science. I recall hearing a neuroscientist in a radio interview saying how, once the underlying damage to the brain was repaired, all the person needed to do was practice a task, just like he did. Such statements reveal an astonishing degree of ignorance around how we actually do what we do, and inevitably call into question what it is that science thinks it is actually going to achieve. It should be obvious that all of us actually need the capacity to perform any task, or we will not be able to perform it and that is why the realm of functional performance is so crucial in all of this; that capacity is our functional capacity.

Ultimately, the capacity to improve upon cognitive performance requires us to understand what cognitive performance actually is and how we generate any of the skills and abilities we all tend to accept that we have. When I first began my work in visual perceptual performance, I used a great many of the terms associated with cognitive performance and I often wondered if I had stumbled across a more subtle level of cognitive performance. These days I do tend to see cognitive performance to be an appearance of something much deeper and more profound, which tends to be obscured by the very way in which we and seeing and engaging in the world.



So let's look at something we all pretty much do without ever giving it much consideration – walking and let's consider how it is any of us walk. We get up in the morning without having to think, "Now how does that walking thing go?" We can walk and perform all manner of other highly refined and integrated tasks at the same time, and never give walking a moment's consideration.

I often ask people to look to their experience of walking and consider how it is they are doing it. Interestingly, some people will immediately see that they have no idea how they are walking and yet others will jump to their minds and begin an intellectual analysis of the task. This later group often tends to be people who live very much in their heads and who, in the absence of any answers in looking to their experience, want to think these answers up. It's been my experience that most of the 'science' around functional performance is derived from such analysing and yet, functional performance is experiential, and when it is broken down into concepts, the totality of what is 'functional performance' is lost.

To demonstrate how limited thinking actually is, just try thinking your way through walking across a room. Engage in that intellectual analysis and see what happens to your performance; it will become chaotic and fractured and we will find that we no longer have the capacity to carry that cup of coffee while we are walking because we have abandoned our inherent capacity for integrated performance (an experiential state) for a mind or thinking based state.

Thinking our way through a task is called conceptual task performance and it is something we see a lot of in people who have a significant cognitive deficit. In kids we see them performing tasks by rote, where each step has no relationship to any other step or to the task as a whole. They are performing this way because some kind soul trained them into doing so. While they may be able to perform some tasks, there is nothing functional about such performance. It is



inherently self-limiting, unless we are able to move into integrated task performance, where we do not have to think about what we are doing. Integrated task performance is spontaneous, highly efficient, accurate, relaxing, and harmonious and all done without any thought at all.<sup>1</sup>

## *It's all about sensory information*

Anyone who has a cognitive deficit has had some damage occur to the pathways in their brain. Their capacity to deal with the everyday volumes of sensory information found within life is limited and they are unable to process all of it. This means that they will leave some sensory information out of what is processed and integrated and, because all of our performance follows on from what we perceive, information left out of what we perceive, will also be left out of the tasks we perform.

What I have just said here is at the heart of cognitive performance. While we may look at what someone is doing and determine that they have a neurological cognitive based disorder, this is only ever the outcome of a much deeper issue – a breakdown within perceptual performance. If we are going to understand cognitive performance, we need to understand it is all built upon perceptual performance and that much of what we are observing is an appearance and is not real, solid to actual.

*With that, I would like to welcome you to my world, the world of  
visual perceptual performance*

*Natoya Rose*  
*Occupational Therapist*



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<sup>1</sup> I've done some work with elite athletes on refining and improving upon their performance by providing them with direct experiences of experiential states and integrated task performance and its always fascinating to see what happens to their performance as a consequence of giving up the effort and hard work and allowing themselves to experience what they are doing completely.

