ASK AN EXPERT

KRIS LONSWAY, OPTWELL FOUNDER

How can people combat dementia?

Kris Lonsway helplessly witnessed her mother's journey with Alzheimer's disease, having already experienced the anguish of grandmother's battle with dementia.

Against that family backdrop, Lonsway learned she, too, carries one copy of the ApoE4 gene, which more than doubles her risk of late-onset Alzheimer's. But instead of resigning herself to hereditary fate, the organizational psychologist put her energy into short-circuiting the affliction by adopting brain-healthy habits.

That led Lonsway last year to found the nonprofit OptWell, dedicated to promote the health and wellness of people who live, work and play in the western suburbs. The organization will hold the free Brain Health Matters event Thursday, April 16, at The Community House, bringing health experts to offer actionable guidance and resources to residents of all ages (see Page 19 for details).

"Forty-five percent of dementia cases, including Alzheimer's, are preventable," Lonsway said. "Our programs promote evidence-based healthy habits."

Specifically she touts five core behaviors: eating well, exercise, mental wellness, quality sleep and health management.

It may seem straightforward, but execution is everything, like getting at least 150–300 minutes of moderate or 75–150 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity weekly as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control.

"Less than half of Americans are meeting the exercise guideline," she said.

Lonsway is a veritable font of knowledge on the subject, having consumed research while her mother was declining. She cited the U.S. Pointer Study, a two-year clinical trial conducted by the Alzheimer's Association, that demonstrated that multi-domain lifestyle interventions — including diet, exercise and cognitive stimulations — significantly improve or maintain cognitive function in older adults at risk for cognitive decline.

"After two years, those who were in the structured group took a cognitive test, and they scored like they were two years younger," she said.

Adhering to the MIND, diet, for example, has shown to benefit cognitive and heart health.The culinary approach, which promotes dark leafy greens and berries, is meant to be pleasurable, not punitive.

"We want it to be fun and delicious and something that people look forward to. That variety of nutrients is what's going to optimize brain health and overall health."

Incidence of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias are on the rise, and Lonsway noted that 50 percent of those diagnosed with Alzheimer's don't even carry the ApoE4 gene. So the long-term goal is building partnerships with towns and private enterprise to create so-called Blue Zone communities where the entire population lives significantly longer, healthier lives.

"When you're surrounded by people who are practicing healthy habits, it's easier to adopt them yourself," she said.

For now, events like Brain Health Matters are equipping people with practical tools and resources.

"It's not rocket science, but there is something to say about focusing on modifiable risk factors. We're trying to tick a lot of the boxes in our programs."

— by Ken Knutson

OptWell founder Kris Lonsway said all ages can adopt habits that promote good brain health outcomes. "Parents are a key audience because they can affect the health of their aging parents and also influence their kids," she said. (photo provided)

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