

Alzheimer's: A Societal Crisis

David Shenk, author of *The Forgetting*, emphasizes that Alzheimer's is not only a problem for individuals and families but also for society as a whole. He and other Alzheimer's experts warn that as the baby boomers age, Alzheimer's rates will continue to grow, creating even more serious economic and public policy issues than already exist. Students will learn about these projections and will think about the ways in which Alzheimer's poses significant problems for all members of society.

Grade Levels

9-12

Estimated time

2-3 class periods

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Discuss ways in which diseases affect individuals, families, and society.
- View and answer questions about segments from *The Forgetting* related to the impact of Alzheimer's disease on society and families.
- Brainstorm and list ways that Alzheimer's might affect the economy, government, and health care system.
- Write informational letters telling the general public why our society should be concerned about Alzheimer's disease.

Materials Needed

- Computers with Internet access
- TV and VCR or DVD player or Internet access (*The Forgetting* is available online at <http://www.pbs.org/theforgetting>)
- *The Forgetting* video (To order visit [Shop PBS for Teachers](#))

Standards

National Civics Standards:

16. Understands the major responsibilities of the national government for domestic and foreign policy, and understands how government is financed through taxation
21. Understands the formation and implementation of public policy
28. Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals

National Health Standards:

2. Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health
8. Knows essential concepts about the prevention and control of disease

Teaching Strategy

1. Ask students to name some illnesses or medical conditions they've heard about, and write their ideas on the board.
2. Write the words "acute" and "chronic" on the board, and provide these definitions of chronic and acute diseases: Acute diseases generally begin suddenly and last only a short period of time. The patient typically returns to full or almost full health. Chronic diseases usually develop more gradually and last long periods of time. Most chronic diseases cannot be cured, and patients must learn ways to manage and cope with their conditions.
3. Ask students which of the diseases they've listed on the board can be classified as chronic, and circle the names of those illnesses. If they haven't listed any chronic diseases, add some to the list (e.g. cancer, heart disease, emphysema, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's).
4. In a brief class discussion, ask them to describe ways in which chronic diseases affect people at the individual level. For example, cancer causes pain, makes a person tired (particularly with chemotherapy treatments), changes a person's plans for the future, and may cause depression.
5. Now ask students to describe ways in which chronic diseases affect people's families. They will probably realize that it's stressful for family members to deal with a loved one's cancer or other chronic health problem and those family members might have to adjust their lifestyles to help care for the sick individual.
6. To end the discussion, ask students to describe how some of these chronic diseases affect society. For example, can they think of any ways in which we're all affected by cancer? Examples include being encouraged to donate to nonprofits for cancer research or having to pay more money for health insurance to cover cancer treatments for other people. Explain that they'll be focusing on the societal impact of disease in this lesson.
7. Ask students to discuss the things they already know or think they know about Alzheimer's disease. What happens to Alzheimer's patients? What age group is most likely to develop Alzheimer's? Have they known anyone with this disease?
8. Inform students that Alzheimer's, although manifested in mental and emotional symptoms, is really a physiological disease. The symptoms are caused by damage to the brain, which can be seen by examining brain tissue under a microscope or in an MRI. What special challenges might be presented by a disease that has primarily mental and emotional symptoms? Might there be a stigma associated with a disease that makes people act forgetful or express childlike emotions such as extreme anger or jealousy? Why is it important for the public to be educated about the true nature and causes of such a disease?
9. Have students watch *The Forgetting*. If time is limited, just show the following segments. As they're watching, ask them to think about how Alzheimer's affects people at the individual, family, and societal level.

beginning of tape - 00:04:10 (introduction; statements about how Alzheimer's is a societal problem)

00:08:56 -00:11:16 (statistics about Alzheimer's as a "looming public health disaster")

00:36:27 -00:47:23 (effects of the disease on family members; support groups)

00:54:59 -00:58:15 (family history in genetic Alzheimer's)

10. Rewind the tape to 01:03:38, and re-play the portion in which David Shenk proclaims "We absolutely have to stop this disease - there's just no choice. As a nation, as an economy, as a civilization, we have to end it now."
11. Ask students to explain what they think Mr. Shenk means by this comment. Why is Alzheimer's such a pressing concern for our society?
12. Write these words on the board, and ask students to copy them on their own paper: Economy, Government, Health Care System. Ask students to contribute ways in which each of these three aspects of their society and country might be impacted by the predicted rise in Alzheimer's rates, and write their ideas under each heading.

Assessment

Have students use the Web links listed below to find more information about the ways in which Alzheimer's disease is a societal problem and not just a problem for individuals and families. They should identify at least three ways that Alzheimer's impacts society, including economic and public policy issues.

Ask students to imagine that they're in charge of public education campaigns to teach people about the reasons why we as a society should be concerned about Alzheimer's disease and should support research toward ending this disease. Have them convey this information in one-page informational letters to the general public.

These Web sites will be particularly helpful:

PBS *The Forgetting*—"[Risk Factors](#)" and "[Resources](#)"

Statistics About Alzheimer's Disease: http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_facts_figures.asp

Family Caregiver Alliance: [Alzheimer's Disease Fact Sheet](#)

Extension Ideas

Expand upon the Assessment activity by having students work in groups that have been "hired" by the Alzheimer's Association (<http://www.alz.org>) to develop a public education campaign about the reasons why Alzheimer's disease concerns everyone.

Have groups use the Web resources mentioned in the Assessment step above to gather information about this topic. In their research, they should try to answer these questions:

How much is Alzheimer's projected to grow over the next few decades, as the baby boomers continue to age?

What demands will the projected increase in Alzheimer's place on the health care system? On the economy?

What types of public policy issues relate to Alzheimer's disease? What types of public and governmental decisions need to be made concerning Alzheimer's?

What improvements should be made in public policy to prevent Alzheimer's from becoming an even bigger societal problem?

Have groups prepare written or oral presentations describing the answers to the above questions and explaining why our society should be concerned about Alzheimer's disease and should support Alzheimer's research.

Have each student or group choose one organization that's helping to deal with Alzheimer's as a societal problem. They can find links to some of these organizations at the Resources section of *The Forgetting* Web site (<http://www.pbs.org/theforgetting/resources>).

Ask them to look for and list that organization's mission and major accomplishments. Then ask them to imagine that they're planning a fundraiser for this organization, and have them determine what they would do to make sure the public understood the importance of the organization's mission and the significance of the problem.

Have them compile their ideas into an educational flyer that the organization could pass out to the general public or to people attending the fundraiser. The flyer should do the following:

Describe the ways in which Alzheimer's is a problem for everyone in our society, not just patients and caregivers.

Recommend at least two areas on which the American public, elected officials or nonprofit organizations should focus in order to make Alzheimer's less of a strain on our social services and economy.

Online Resources

PBS *The Forgetting* : "[Resources](http://www.pbs.org/theforgetting/resources)"
[http://www.pbs.org/theforgetting](http://www.pbs.org/theforgetting/resources)

Statistics About Alzheimer's Disease: http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_facts_figures.asp

Family Caregiver Alliance Alzheimer's Disease Fact Sheet:
http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=567

Caregiver's Army:

<http://www.caregiversarmy.org>

About the Author

Betsy Hedberg is a teacher and freelance curriculum writer who has published lesson plans on a variety of subjects. She received her Secondary Teaching Credential in Social Studies from Loyola Marymount University and her Master of Arts in Geography from UCLA. In addition to curriculum writing, she presents seminars and training sessions to help teachers incorporate the Internet into their classrooms.