

ALS patients more likely to have other mental, behavioral problems

Because ALS primarily affects a person's motor neurons, it has been assumed that the disease spares a person's mental faculties. But the evidence behind this assumption has started to crumble, according to senior author Sharon Abrahams, a researcher at the University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom.

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"It was considered as a saving grace. 'Although my body is affected, my mind is intact,'" Abrahams said. "Sadly, this is incorrect."

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They recruited 161 ALS patients receiving care at one of three medical centers in the UK and Ireland, interviewing them and their caretakers. As part of the interview, the patients were given tests that measured their cognition and memory.

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Overall, 29 percent of ALS patients had some form of cognitive impairment, while around half had at least one behavioral symptom. These symptoms, such as apathy or a lack of empathy, were seen in people at every stage of ALS, but largely became more common as the disease advanced (memory problems were more common in ALS sufferers, but didn't become more prevalent in the later stages). By the last stage, few people were completely symptomless.

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If nothing else, they point out, taking into account a sufferer's mental as well as physical health will allow them to live as comfortably as possible before their final days.

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