

'Boomer dementia' alarming

As a top adviser in a financial services company, Susan Grant, 59, knew something was wrong when she found her thoughts so muddled she couldn't remember if she needed to take the interstate north or south to drive home. More coverage: [mySA Health](#)

By Richard A. Marini

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As a top adviser in a multinational financial services company, [Susan Grant 59](#), was used to effortlessly juggling numbers, client details and other complex information in her head. So when she found her thoughts so muddled she couldn't remember if she needed to take the interstate north or south to drive home, she knew something was wrong.

"I'd find myself talking to clients and unable to think of a word," she recalled. "So I'd stop in the middle of a sentence - and then I couldn't remember the sentence itself."

A series of medical tests resulted in six diagnoses - everything from Alzheimer's to drug overuse - before her condition was finally identified: frontotemporal disease, or FTD.

FTD is a term used to describe several little-known disorders that progressively damage the parts of the brain that are in charge of personality, decision-making and language. Also known as frontotemporal lobar degeneration or Pick's disease, FTD often is confused with - and misdiagnosed as - Alzheimer's disease. Yet while Alzheimer's destroys memory, FTD changes behavior. An easygoing person becomes aggressive. Someone fun-loving and outgoing is suddenly passive and withdrawn.

But the most alarming difference between Alzheimer's and FTD is the age at which it strikes. While Alzheimer's is primarily a disease of the aged, FTD tends to occur between ages 40 and 65 - hence the nickname "baby boomer dementia." It can affect people as young as their 20s.

"It hits in the prime of life," said [Sarah Oxford](#), executive director of the San Antonio-based [Frontotemporal Disease Association](#). "Most FTD patients are in their most productive years. They're mid-career, with families, young children. The effects can be devastating."

"Family members say things like, 'He's not the Bob we've always known. It's like he's a different person,'" said Dr. [Paul Schulz](#), director of the dementia clinic at the [University of Texas Health Science Center](#) in Houston.

No one knows how many people are affected by FTD. Estimates range from 250,000 to 1 million people in the U.S. By comparison, more than 5 million are afflicted with Alzheimer's.

Symptoms vary by patient and, at least at first, often are explained away as being due to stress, lack of sleep, menopause, even depression. As the disease progresses, symptoms become more severe and can include paranoia, loss of empathy, reckless driving and lack of concern for personal hygiene. Patients also often suffer from what's known as disinhibition, or a lack of social restraint.

Without any background whatsoever in film, Grant has made a documentary about FTD, titled "Planning for Hope," which will be distributed to public television stations within the next three months. In it, she interviews family members and FTD patients.

Their stories can be startling. One man, who smashed his truck with a baseball bat, is asked why he did it. He simply shrugs and says, "I don't know."

As the disease progresses, so does the inappropriate behavior.

After [Michael Bigler](#) of San Antonio choked his wife, Kay, he spent time in a psychiatric ward. Afterward, he would calmly discuss his plans to try again with her, their daughter and anyone else who cared to listen. Bigler is now in an assisted living facility, heavily medicated to help control his violent outbursts.

"It's a terrible disease," his wife said. "It's like a nightmare that never ends."