



**Dr Isabelle Miclette is a Doctor of Clinical Psychology with 15 years' experience working with older people. She has a deep passion for improving the mental health of New Zealanders, especially those living in retirement villages. Her recent research, as part of her Executive Master of Business Administration, explored the opportunities to improve residents' mental wellbeing.**

Metlifecare connected her to a number of our village managers and employees who provided real world insights into a range of experiences, including what works, where the gaps are, and opportunities for improvement.

In this three-part series, Dr Isabelle will share her insights and a host of helpful tips for residents.

Isabelle's first story focuses on memory loss (or in doctor-speak, "cognitive decline.") It's often very worrying for the person who just "can't remember!" Does any part of this story often sound familiar to you?

# Where did I park my car?

**M**argaret sat in the common room of Rosewood Village, gazing out the window. It had been six months since she moved into the retirement village, and while she appreciated the warm community of those she socialised with, a growing sense of unease clouded her days.

Forgetfulness had crept into her life; misplaced keys, forgotten dates, and most troubling, an incredibly stressful moment when she couldn't remember where she had parked her car after grocery shopping. Her memories of wandering the supermarket parking lot with a racing heart and fast breathing still haunted her.

Margaret approached Lisa, the Village Manager. "Lisa," she began hesitantly, "I'm worried about my memory. I keep forgetting things, and it's making me so anxious."

Lisa listened empathetically. "Margaret, you're absolutely not alone. I hear this same concern from many residents, especially as the years tick by. And, they often say it's not just the memory

lapses by themselves, it's when they become more and more frequent and how it decreases your confidence and peace of mind."

Margaret sighed, "I thought it was just me."

"Not at all," Lisa reassured her. "Those forgetful moments can trigger anxiety, which can show up as a racing heart, shallow breathing, constant worry, trouble sleeping, or even a sense of hopelessness. But there are techniques to help you remember things (e.g. lists, familiar routines) and there are ways to manage those uncomfortable feelings. The first step is acknowledging it's happening, which you have just done!"

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## Helpful things you could do to reduce anxious feelings:

- 1. Breathing Exercises:** Calming breath: inhale for four counts, hold for two, and exhale for seven, to help in stressful moments. The trick is to practise every day, even when not feeling nervous. Your body will remember!
- 2. Mindfulness Practice:** Weekly mindfulness sessions (in a group or online), guided meditation or gentle tai chi or yoga sessions are all ways to help embrace being in the present moment, which stops unhelpful rumination or catastrophising.
- 3. Support Groups:** Ask if your village has a group where residents share their experiences with anxiety and memory issues in a safe and confidential environment, and go along.
- 4. Talk to a Psychologist:** Book an initial session with a local psychologist to explore your specific experiences and things that are affecting your ability to cope and enjoy life. They'll help you develop strategies tailored to your own circumstances.

## Back to Margaret and her often 'hard-to-locate' parked car.

Margaret was grateful for Lisa's reassurance and began incorporating some of these strategies into her life. She practised questioning her worrying thoughts and used breathing exercises when she felt anxious. She attended mindfulness classes and found comfort in focusing on the present moment rather than worrying about what might happen next.

Then, putting it into practice, one afternoon after shopping, Margaret was faced again with locating where she'd parked her car. But instead of panicking, she took a deep breath and waited. "Row three," she said out loud as it came back to her.

Margaret shared her carpark success with Lisa. "I'm learning that while I can't control everything, I can control how I respond, and that makes all the difference."

Lisa agreed, "You're doing wonderfully, Margaret; and remember, you're not alone in this."

**Dr Isabelle's next story will focus on loneliness, which can occur even in the presence of others. Look out for it in our next edition of *The Villager*.**