



**THE INSTITUTE  
FOR PATIENT CARE**

**The Norman Knight Nursing Center  
for Clinical & Professional Development**

**PCAs Quick Reference: Delirium, Dementia & Depression, Which is it?**

What do they have in common?

Memory issues, confusion, anxiety, delusions, hallucinations and behavior problems

What is Delirium? Sudden change in mental status, caused by other medical diagnoses, for example a urinary tract infection, or dehydration. It is a dangerous syndrome: more than 7 million Americans suffer from delirium each year. Their hospital stay may be longer and they may have more complications. More than 60% of patients with delirium are not identified by the healthcare system. There are 2 main types- **hyperactive** (easy to recognize) Rapid changes in emotion, hallucinations, restlessness, anxiety and fear and **hypoactive** (often not noticed) withdrawn, flat affect and apathetic. The underlying illness is the primary treatment.

What is Dementia? New terminology- called neurocognitive disorder (NCD). It is NOT reversible. Seen in degenerative disorders such as Alzheimer’s disease, Huntington’s disease, ALS, MS, Parkinson’s dementia, Adult Down’s syndrome.

Dementia and Delirium causes

Vitamin deficiencies, endocrine & organ failure, infections, tumors, head trauma, toxic disorders, psychiatric diagnoses and others.

What is Depression? There are many forms, they may present differently in older adults, have a lot of somatic symptoms, related to chronic or acute illness. It can be treated with medications, psychotherapy, lifestyle modifications, socialization, exercise and improved diet.

What is the role of the PCA (under the direction of the RN)?

- Treatment of Delirium
  - Orient patient frequently
  - Regulate sleep cycle
  - Give adequate fluids, nutrition and patient out of bed
  - Reduce stimulation, reassure safety, focus on environment

**The Triad**

	<b>Delirium</b>	<b>Depression</b>	<b>Dementia</b>
Onset	Acute	Sub-acute	Chronic
Cognition	Attention	Deficits	Memory
Reversible	Potentially	Yes	No
Future	Increased risk prolonged recovery /death	Decreased function	Long term care, decreased function, death