



Training Tips, Tech Tools, and More for Creative Dementia Care

Caring for people with dementia and managing behaviors in a way that improves quality of life, reduces (or eliminates) the need for medications, and keeps them safe and out of the ER or hospital is an ongoing challenge. Kevin O’Neil, MD, CMD, chief medical officer at ALG Senior and Medical Advisor to AALNA’s Advisory Council, and his colleagues developed a program called Reflections to approach effective dementia care and behavioral management. This program and the research and work that went into it suggest a few keys to any successful team-based dementia care program.

A Whole-Person Approach

To start, it should focus on the whole person, “This program takes into account each individual’s previous experiences, likes and dislikes and limitations to create a personalized care plan that is tailored to their needs,” said O’Neil, adding, “By focusing on the whole person, rather than just their illness, we are able to make the resident’s journey with us a more meaningful experience.” This requires getting to know residents as individuals and ensuring that staff have consistent and up-to-date access to this information.

Training in several areas can help staff provide quality, personalized care:

- **Enabling/promoting dignity.** A resident’s dignity is enhanced by having the ability to make some choices in their day-to-day life. However, it is important to note that too many choices can be overwhelming. “It is best to make suggestions one at a time or give residents two options,” said O’Neil.
- **Creating an immersive environment.** “It is important to give your residents an immersive experience based on their life story. A controlled environment with enriching experiences can help a person with dementia feel connected to normal life,” said O’Neil. Quality of life can be improved by keeping residents occupied and stimulated with things like baking, spending time with robotic pets, gentle exercise, light therapy, aromatherapy, and religious/spiritual services.



- **Providing culinary experiences.** This is a bit of a balancing act; it is important to remember that residents with dementia may have problems with eating and/or drinking. In addition to providing residents with the support and assistance they need, dining should be a positive, social experience in a relaxed environment with friendly music.
- **Implementing a collaborative team approach.** “Studies show that a team approach produces healthier dementia residents and relieves stress on caregivers,” said Amanda Maske, vice president of healthcare services at ALG Senior. Team meetings should involve discussions of care plans, changes in status, and additional services the resident might need. However, regular conversations with family and caregivers will help identify new strategies to keep residents safe and comfortable as well as reduce, or even eliminate, instances of agitation or behaviors.
- **Creating a personalized care plan.** By getting to know residents and understanding who they are and who they were before they started to experience cognitive impairment and dementia is key. Don’t make assumptions about residents. For instance, not everyone likes being called by their first name, being touched or hugged or interacting with children or animals.

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Training Tips, Tech Tools and More for Creative Dementia Care (Cont.)

Three Keys: Teaching, Talking, Listening

Maske said, “I have spent the last six months revamping our memory care program. We titled it ‘Reflections’ because one big thing in memory care is to train staff to reflect on residents’ pasts.

Our program has a strong focus on what residents did for a living, how they liked to spend their spare time, what accomplishments they’re most proud of, and so forth. This information can help us deal with things that seem like behavioral problems but actually are part of their life.”

She added, “We are focusing on teaching staff how to think outside the box to get to know residents better.” She also noted that if a staff member discovers something that works or comes up with a good solution, she shares that at standup meetings and makes sure that they get recognition for their innovative ideas. “If they are there, I let them talk about it. It empowers them in front of their peers. That goes a long way,” she observed.

Staff and families also have to work together, and this means strong communication. “Sometimes it’s difficult for staff to understand that families may not be able to be objective. All they know is that what you did didn’t work and their family member is still suffering,” said Michelle Kronquist, PsyD. She stressed, “We have to bring families into the loop and educate them about what we’re doing and why.”

This is particularly true when it comes to medications. Both staff and families need to understand that medications should not be the first-line intervention for behavioral issues. “Everyone needs to realize that these drugs are

not without risk and sometimes have significant side effects,” said O’Neil. While non-pharmacologic interventions take time and effort, he admitted, the benefits are significant.

Communication is key, but it also goes hand in hand with documentation. “It is important to document what we do, why we do it, what conversations we had with the patient and family, etc. If you do something that doesn’t work and you document it, the next person is less likely to repeat something ineffective,” said Kronquist.

There are various tools, resources, and platforms to maximize communication and prevent information from falling through the cracks. One powerful tech tool, Kronquist noted, is Ella®, an app that provides decision-making support at the point of care. This enables team members to document information such as personal histories, reactions/behaviors, interventions tried and the results, triggers, and more. Having all this information in one place for team members to document and share can help improve care and outcomes. For instance, Kronquist said, “New staff can provide person-centered care from their first day. And information exchanges during shift changes are seamless.”

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