

Seeing the Complex Person Within: Changing Caregiver Perceptions of Memory Care Residents

Madison Sawyer, Marketing Major with a Global Health and Film Studies Double Minor



Suzanne Kunkel, Ph.D

Paul Flaspohler, Ph.D



? My Question

How can we improve the quality of life of memory care residents?

I spent 42 hours as a volunteer visitor with memory care assisted living at The Lutheran Home in Wauwatosa, WI. I took detailed notes on my observations and interactions with caregivers and staff.



📖 The Literature

Caregiver Perceptions

- Fear Alzheimer'sⁱ
- View those with Alzheimer's as passive recipients of careⁱⁱ
- Rate a resident's quality of life based on their "level of dependency"ⁱⁱⁱ
- Do not see residents as people with their own subjective experiencesⁱⁱⁱ

Communication

- Easy for caregivers to lose sight of the human being inside as the possibility for typical rapport is diminished^{iv}
- Those with Alzheimer's are still able to recognize non-verbal cuesⁱⁱ
- Higher level of emotional communication between residents and caregivers can lead to worse caregiver mental health^v

What is Successful?

- Spiritual practices are successful in reducing resident stress^{vi}
- Programming with children, animals, and, especially, music stimulates the soul^{vii}
- Evidence-informed dementia care training programs lead to more consistent improvements among caregivers^{viii}

🔍 Findings

Observations about Residents

- Residents appeared lethargic and disinterested unless specifically engaged
- Those who's conditions were less severe were cognizant of the worse state of others
- Those who were further along were nonverbal, withdrawn, and depressed
- Residents got teary-eyed when talking about their families and childhood



"I don't know why I'm here. I hope I'm not in an old persons home."
-Jeanette

Observations about Caregivers

- Staff members appeared to be putting in minimal effort to engage residents
- Preoccupied with caring for the residents' physical needs
- Constantly chatting with one another about their families, kids, and personal lives
- Genuinely care about the residents, but need to distance themselves from the difficulty of their work environment

What was Successful?

- Failure-free activities such as art, puzzles, and "keep the balloon in the air"
- **Starting conversation with residents when helping them with muscle-memory activities (such as a manicure)**
- Interactive music programming
- **Taking time to ask individuals about their past and their interests**
- Interactive programming with children
- **Having residents teach you a hobby they used to enjoy (such as knitting)**
- Bible studies and spiritual services
- Patiently reteaching a game they used to enjoy (such as Solitaire)
- **Telling stories and jokes**
- Looking through pictures with nonverbal residents

▶ Recommendations

- Employ more programming staff so as not to rely on volunteers to provide the human connection residents need
- Train caregivers with evidence-informed dementia care training programs to improve their understanding of how the disease influences behavior and mood
- Offer in-house counseling or stress-relief programs for caregivers, thus supporting them in being more involved with residents on a personal level
- Make personal resident engagement a normalized part of care by reinforcing the importance of such interactions through ongoing seminars and workshops for caregivers

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