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DEMENTIA RESOURCES

FOR PROVIDERS & STAFF

STAFF IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE



NCAL
NATIONAL CENTER FOR ASSISTED LIVING



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STAFF AND COMMUNITY IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

This document addresses topics relevant for those who serve individuals living with dementia. Initial and on-going training for staff members is a large component of evidence-based care models including, but not limited to, the Alzheimer's Association Dementia Care Practice Recommendations.

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INTRODUCTION

Professional care partners working to support those living with dementia benefit from training that supports a greater understanding of brain changes, symptoms, and how the person may be experiencing their environment. Empathy training is recommended for those working in health-care settings to improve understanding of the person's experience and how to communicate effectively with them (Moundatsou, et. Al, 2020).

Empathy describes tools a care partner may use to read and understand the emotions, motivations, and experiences of those they are working with, and an ability to modify staff approaches and techniques in a desire to create a positive experience and therapeutic relationship with the person. (Harvard Medical School, 2025; Muller, et. Al, 2024).

There are a variety of methods for enhancing empathy training in senior living and health care environments, including the use of storytelling, simulation activities, role modeling the desired actions of care partners, and role playing (Muller, et. Al, 2024).

The DEEP training at NCAL Day provides recommendations for how to incorporate empathy-focused training activities for a variety of budgets, resources, and schedules. These activities are meant to promote active and experiential learning opportunities.

SAMPLE EMPATHY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Storytelling:

Example success stories from staff members on use of modified approach, communication, engagement, and environmental techniques to improve interactions with someone living with dementia.

Equipment: a compilation of stories that can be gathered from direct care partners and organized by type of care scenario. These are excellent tools and can be solicited a few at a time at each staff meeting.

Example: "When approaching David, I kneeled, got below eye level, established eye contact, and smiled warmly. I stated, "Good Morning David." I paused for him to nod and then stated, "It is time for breakfast. Let's go together." David smiled and moved forward in his chair and that told me he understood. When I slowed down my communication he did not startle or stiffen when I assisted him to stand.

Role Playing:

Care-task based scenarios.

- **Transfers to and from a variety of surfaces** (bed to wheelchair, chair to standing, etc.)
Equipment: wheelchair, walker, gait belt, lift (as appropriate)
- **Undressing for a bath**
Equipment: robe, walker, wheelchair, lift, towel
- **Dressing tasks after waking**
Equipment: chair, blanket, socks or TED hose, shirt with buttons or zipper
- **Assisting with verbal and non-verbal cues during a meal**
Equipment: chair or wheelchair, table, plate, fork, knife, spoon, napkin, cup
Optional - demonstrate "assisting" with giving the person bites of pudding or applesauce.
- **Guiding the person to the toilet**
Equipment: goggles with the sides blacked out, walker, gait belt, bathroom
- **Supporting someone who has stood up and is "stuck" and cannot remember how to sit or move forward**
Equipment: chair or wheelchair, walker, gait belt
- **Guiding a person to an activity with verbal and non-verbal cues**
Equipment: table with activity on it, chair or wheelchair, walker
- **Proper greetings/approaches for:** 1) Early dementia 2) Moderate dementia 3) Advanced dementia
Equipment: chair or wheelchair with person seated in it and staff member kneels or sits on stool or chair for approach

Role Modeling:

Demonstration of positive non-verbal communication

- Warm facial expressions
- Slower, purposeful walking and movements
- Gestures that convey meaning during tasks
- Approaching from the front and at or below eye level

Simulation:

- **Mirror activity**

Equipment: handheld mirrors (dollar store quality works great), scratch paper per person, pen, or pencil per person

- **Simulated dementia experience with gear added while doing a task list**

Equipment: goggles, headphones with distractions, gloves with unpleasant sensory experience that impacts fine motor skills

Approximately 15-20 minutes each session

- **Jarring experience** (simulating overstimulation) - with gear added while the person experiences a care/daily-life focused task

Equipment: goggles, gloves, headphones

Approximately 15-20 minutes each session

Sample Experiences

1. *Being hoisted in a lift into a tub*
2. *Having extra layers of clothing added on top of normal clothing and having those taken off with assistance.*
3. *Being assisted with dining with items of various texture (applesauce or pudding, with crushed cookies on top)*
4. *Being asked to complete a complicated task (sort and organize items, sort clothing and add to hangers and put away, etc.*

PLANNING AND LOGISTICS

Create a regular schedule of empathy-building staff activities.

- Identify how much time is available at your location for a scheduled empathy-based activity per month. It is recommended you offer an activity at each monthly meeting.
- Work with each department supervisor to ensure there is an empathy-building activity offered at either the All-Team Meeting or the department-specific meetings offered throughout the year.
- Report back to Leadership Meetings on what activities were completed and the staff members' reactions or identified areas of strength or opportunity for additional education.

Create a closing or debrief summary after each empathy-building staff activity (choose what questions or messages you want to enforce per session)

Sample De-Brief Questions

- What part of the activity did you find most challenging? Why?
- How did you feel during the activity?
- How did your experience make you think about people we work with who are living with dementia and their experiences?
- What aspects of your approach, communication or tasks are you going to focus on, based on your experience in this activity?

Budget Considerations - consider a variety of options for the "garb" and equipment used for activities based on the budget.

- Gloves with kernels of corn
- Masking tape to tape fingers together instead of using gloves.
- Safety goggles with black marker or paint or construction paper on sides and with opaque mod podge or glue on lenses
- Headphones with Bluetooth or plugged into individual devices for noise.
- Earplugs if headphones are too expensive.
- Consider using role-play or role-modeling or storytelling throughout the year, in between simulation experiences to spread out spending.

Tips:

- Adjust the garb supplies to your community based upon your needs and budgetary constraints.
- Consider a partnership with a local sponsor for materials (gloves, mirrors, etc.)
- Modify the types of materials used for low cost, reusable items.

Location and Room Set-Up

Space and room requirement considerations

- A conference room, education room, or resident apartment - based on the activities you are doing for the month for your team.

Consider how many facilitators you need for your activities, based on the number of staff who need training, the activities you are doing, and whether you need to de-brief in smaller groups or by department so supervisors can share department-specific expectations.

Tips for Success

It is vital that leaders in empathy training help their staff members to “connect the dots” from the learning activities completed to how the skills will work in everyday tasks and scenarios. Staff members appreciate understanding the “why” behind the training. Share that dementia empathy-building experiences are meant to help staff members better understand how they can make an impact on the person living with dementia by making deliberate adjustments to how they set up tasks or how they communicate.

Help your staff by supporting their conversation around concrete ideas on how they can implement actions or steps into their own individual roles based on what they learned. Have staff members list out exact actions they want to take (e.g., “I want to work on getting at the person’s eye level before speaking.” vs. “I need to try harder.”)

Identify a plan for goal setting around the actions they identified and a plan for observing and giving them feedback on the actions they commit to.

Example “Why” Statements:

- Understand the experience from the person living with dementia’s perspective.
- Gain improved understanding of the changes that occur in how the person processes and responds to verbal communication cues.
- Improve awareness of environmental barriers to effective communication: background noise, multiple people talking at once, distraction during complex tasks, etc.
- Enhance empathy and patience.
- Understanding of the reason for changes in how we approach, communicate, and engage with someone living with dementia.
- Improve discussions on quality improvement and ensure regulatory compliance with staff dementia education (as applicable)

Sample Inexpensive Shopping List (Designed for ten staff members-adapt as needed)

- 2-3 bags of unpopped popcorn or bulk corn kernels
- 1 box of non-latex gloves
- 10 pairs of safety goggles with the sides blacked out to mirror peripheral vision changes.
- 1 large box of earplugs to simulate hearing loss (1 or both ears)
- 2-3 headphones (Bluetooth enabled) to play distracting noises or music.
- 1 box of plastic spoons
- Bulk purchase of applesauce or pudding to simulate assisted dining experience.
- Bulk purchase colorful washcloths or socks to sort
- 2-3 shirts (assorted colors) on hangers
- Sheets of paper and a pen for staff to complete an activity of drawing specific things asked of them (clock drawing, animal, etc.)

STAFF RESOURCES

Alzheimer's Association - www.alz.org - this website provides information about Alzheimer's disease and other causes of dementia including free, printable pamphlets and materials that can be used to educate staff members.

Lewy Body Dementia Association - www.lbda.org - this website provides information about Lewy Body Dementia, including free, printable resources that can be used to educate staff members.

National Institute on Aging - <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers-and-dementia> - this website provides access to free, printable pamphlets and resources that can be made available to educate staff members.

Now What? - <https://www.wowt.com/news/now-what> - Educational television program series that addresses a variety of dementia-related topics including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and behavioral health.

UNMC College of Medicine Geriatric Education Center - <https://www.unmc.edu/intmed/divisions/geriatrics/dementia-in-long-term-care/index.html> - this website provides access to free staff education resources for long-term care, related to dementia-care.