Module 5: FFC and Residents with Dementia

A common challenge that assisted living staff faces when trying to incorporate function focused care into daily life is learning how to achieve this with residents who have dementia.

This module offers information and suggestions to help with this task. It includes an article written by Beth Galik, PhD, CRNP, an expert in this field. You can also visit the website below to see part of a presentation that Dr. Galik gave on Function Focused Care and Dementia to staff at a residential facility. This 7-minute clip gives a wonderful overview of function focused care and its benefits, with an emphasis on working with residents who have dementia. We encourage you to share it with staff members as an introduction to function focused care, or as a review that can help spark a discussion with staff about things you can do to integrate this philosophy more fully at your site. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvOWRtkMoVQ&feature=youtu.be

In addition, Module 5 includes FFC Tidbits that provide suggestions on how to work with residents who have memory and behavioral problems, ideas for meaningful activities to do with these residents, and ways to keep residents with dementia active.

Visit the FFC Toolkit website to watch brief video clips demonstrating effective ways to deal with this growing population of older adults experiencing dementia and cognitive decline.
Older adults with dementia are more likely to be physically inactive, require assistance with personal care activities, and have more medical problems than older adults without dementia. There is a tendency to promote sedentary activities rather than exercise among older adults with dementia for fear that they will fall or injure themselves if they are allowed to be mobile and physically active.

Despite the gradual and progressive cognitive and functional decline associated with dementia, there are benefits to keeping older adults engaged in their own personal care and physical activity. These benefits include slight improvement or maintenance of functional abilities, fewer behavioral and depressive symptoms, better sleep, and fewer falls. A function-focused philosophy of care is designed to prevent or minimize functional decline and optimize the function and physical activity of older adults regardless of their memory impairment. It promotes the belief that all older adults are capable of and benefit from some improvement or maintenance of functional potential, even though the function may not be entirely independent, such as passive range of motion, hand-over-hand feeding, or encouragement of self-propulsion in a wheelchair.

Caregivers also benefit from using a function-focused care approach. Even small improvements in the functional performance of older adults with dementia may decrease the physical requirements of caregiving, such as heavy lifting, and also may result in psychological benefits for the caregiver, such as increased self-confidence and improved satisfaction with his/her caregiving role.

There are a variety of caregiving “tricks of the trade” that are crucial to function-focused care activities with older adults with dementia. These strategies include: (1) adapting communication techniques; (2) care and consistency; (3) enhancing sensory experiences; and (4) incorporating humor and play.

Adapting Communication Techniques
Communication techniques that are designed to encourage and motivate older adults with dementia to participate in functional activities should include short, simple verbal cues given while directly facing the individual. Because of short term memory impairment, reminders, encouragement, and praise should be utilized. Physical gesturing, demonstrating, and role modeling are effective for those individuals with difficulties understanding speech.

Care and Consistency
Individuals with dementia are more likely to be active in their own care when routines are predictable and caregivers are consistent. A sense of trust and a caring attitude is helpful in eliciting maximum participation in functional activities.

Enhancing Sensory Activities
Approximately two-thirds of older adults with dementia exhibit apathy and passive behaviors. For these passive individuals, enhanced sensory experiences can be motivating. For example, visual, color contrast between the food and the serving dishes may help with attention to the task of eating. In an exercise class, the use of familiar music can motivate cognitively impaired individuals to dance and move.
Incorporating Humor and Play

Humor and playful activities are often used to prevent catastrophic behavioral outbursts among older adults with dementia. The same strategy can also be utilized to motivate these older adults to be actively involved in their own personal care activities. Some suggested activities that are appropriate for older adults with dementia include: indoor and outdoor hiking programs and parades, balloon toss, beauty makeovers that focus on grooming, movement groups, and dances.

Let’s get moving!
Good ideas

Merge function with fun using Life Skills Relays

by Kim Eichinger

For older adults moving into a retirement community, many of the physical tasks they used to perform are no longer a part of their daily routines. If these individuals do not wish to participate in other forms of exercise, they may become sedentary and at greater risk for compromised mobility.

When challenged by the fact that some older adults do not come from a culture where recreational exercise (or going to a gym) is a part of their lifestyles, staff in the fitness department at Country Meadows retirement communities realized we had to find a less traditional way to engage them in movement.

Life Skills Relays were the solution. The relays are a fun way to introduce components of balance and mobility to a population that might not otherwise participate in an exercise program.

Household tasks such as sweeping with a broom and hanging clothes on a clothesline represent purposeful activities to many people who have raised a family and maintained a home. These life skills involve functional abilities such as standing, weight shifting, stepping in various directions and eye-hand coordination.

For older adults who have dementia, these familiar tasks are actions that are deeply rooted in their memories. They may be able to perform the movements involved in these activities more easily than they can follow instructions during a traditional exercise program. For this special group of people, the benefits include a sense of accomplishment in addition to increasing physical activity.

Set up the activities

These are examples of activities to include:

- Sweeping with a broom
- Hanging laundry on a line
- Sorting and folding laundry
- Carrying shopping bags or empty water jugs

These activities can be performed individually or as a relay. For a relay, when appropriate, challenge participants by either timing them as they complete each task or by allowing them to compete as individuals, partners or teams. As with any activity or exercise program, it is important to respect an individual’s choice regarding participation.

Maintain dignity by using adult items instead of toys. A real clothesline rope, broom or laundry basket can be purchased at a budget store without spending a lot of money. Use creativity for items to sort or hang. We found packages of a dozen socks in a variety of colors at the flea market. They were inexpensive, eye-catching and fun to sort.

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Time Outdoors Can Benefit Residents with Dementia

Have you been able to get your residents outside in the sunshine recently? Fresh air and sunshine can do wonders for people’s spirits, and studies have shown that spending time outside has some other benefits too...

For residents with dementia, research has shown that when people can freely use outdoor areas, agitation and aggression reduce, independence is promoted, and memory recall is more likely to occur. An outdoor space or garden gives people the chance to be physically active, feel unrestrained, be more in touch with nature, be alone if they wish, socialize if they wish, and do meaningful things (like plant flowers) that make them feel at home (http://www.health.vic.gov.au/dementia/changes/gardens.htm). It can also help maximize sleep duration for residents who have trouble staying asleep throughout the night.

While indoor household tasks like folding laundry and sweeping floors can help engage residents in meaningful activity, this can work outside too! Have residents help sweep leaves and dirt off the deck or patio, pick up sticks, fill the bird feeder, and plant or water the flowers. There are lots of outdoor games too...horseshoes, beanbag toss, walking races, and beach ball volleyball to name a few.
“TMT-TMT”: Sometimes Less is Better

“TMT-TMT” stands for “Too Much Talk, Too Much Touch”. It refers to a common tendency we have to over-stimulate cognitively impaired residents by constantly talking to them and touching them, usually in a well-intentioned effort to help and soothe them. The result, however, is that we can make a cognitively impaired resident become more agitated and frustrated, thereby decreasing the chances that they will do things for themselves.

Since we encourage function focused care for all residents, including those with dementia and other cognitive impairments, what is a caregiver to do? Follow these simple steps:

I. Observe.
Set up needed items for them, such as a toothbrush with toothpaste, a comb, or clothing for the day, and see what they do before you do it. JUST WATCH! See if they figure out what to do with these things on their own.

II. Step in gently and quietly.
Start by role modeling what you’d like them to do. For instance, pretend to brush your own teeth or comb your hair and see if they mimic your actions. This alleviates the need for talking or touching them.

Give this a try and see if it helps!
Working with Residents with Memory and Behavioral Problems

Probably one of the most significant challenges that assisted living staff consistently face is working with residents who have memory and behavioral problems. Staff may be reluctant to engage in function focused care with these residents, leading to functional decline. Here are a few tips on how to work with these older adults:

- Behavioral disturbance during care is most likely to occur when the caregiver touches the resident. So, support independent function during activities of daily living by using more cueing and less direct hands-on care.
- Be patient and re-approach the resident later if necessary.
- Avoid confrontation.
- Use simple words and phrases when communicating with the resident, and give them ample time to respond to your questions.
- Catch as catch can! Do what you’re able to do when you’re able to do it. (See suggestions below for range of motion activities to do during times when residents are cooperative.)
- When residents get upset, stand by and let them be upset without trying to fix it. Just observe, make sure they are safe and let the upset moments pass. Then maybe go for a walk!
- Use humor when appropriate and smile!

Some creative ways to engage dementia residents in active range of motion and physical activity:

- Have the resident reach for an item in her closet.
- Have the resident help you in the kitchen by reaching for items in the cupboards.
- Sweep (also helps build balance).
- Fold and fly paper airplanes.
- Kick a ball.
- “Press down on the gas pedal” with their feet.
- Tap a balloon.
- Extend the walk as you are making short trips to the bathroom or dining room.
- Engage others in walking with you—a family member or special visitor.
- Depending on the resident’s likes or dislikes, encourage a walk to see a pet/animal in the facility; children playing outside; or for a cup of fresh brewed coffee.
Activity Offers Benefits for People with Dementia

A recent study has shown that more physical activity relates to improved mood for people with Alzheimer’s disease. Read the study abstract by visiting:


Residents with dementia do benefit from physical activity with improvements in physical function, mood, behavior and sleep. We just may need to be more creative in how we integrate activity into their lives. Short spurts of activity work well here. Here are a few ideas for activities and approaches to help keep residents with dementia active:

- Put on some familiar music for them to dance to or play musical chairs to oldies songs
- Playful competitions between resident and staff can help get them moving and involved, and seeing peers involved can suddenly motivate them!
- When they are walking around, ask them where they are walking to...Ocean City? Appalachian Trail?, etc.
- Have them do an activity with a buddy