

## Living with Dementia and Building Peer Support



Providing opportunities for residents living with dementia to support one another is a preventative treatment that can help address unmet needs<sup>1</sup> (Cohen-Mansfield, 2013). Peer support has a significant impact on loneliness and depression, yet we rarely include this concept on social calendars.

Helping residents help one another makes it possible to explore what is meaningful and enjoyable for both while giving as much control as possible.<sup>2,3</sup> (Knight, Haslam, & Haslam, 2010; Zeisel, 2009).

When working with people living with advanced dementia, one key point is to watch for their preference cues. Use your observations to facilitate simple positive interactions with their peers. Although residents living with advanced dementia are not always able to communicate their choices verbally, they provide other distinct cues that indicate their preferences<sup>4</sup> (Power, 2010). Focusing on these cues can prevent them from being overlooked<sup>5</sup> (Sherwin & Winsby, 2011).

Below are 7 tips that exemplify a shift in focus from passive recipients of care to building engagement and peer support - residents helping residents. By assisting residents to support other residents, peer support becomes possible and simple.

Consider making these tips a daily part of social activities in your community on a regularly scheduled basis. By doing this, you help them help one another.

### 7 Tips for Helping Residents Living with Dementia Help Their Peers

1. **Express kindness to another resident.** Invite one resident to join you to say hello to another resident, even if they are just sitting at the next table. Offer a simple handshake or a hug if it feels appropriate. Other kind gestures include things like getting them a coffee, a flower, or an ice cream, or inviting them to accompany both of you on a walk.

2. **Express sincere appreciation.** Encourage the resident you are with to express appreciative thoughts about the other resident. Model it. We often think appreciative thoughts but fail to voice them.



3. **Visit someone who is struggling with something or who is ill.** It is important to show support to someone, especially if they are struggling, lonely, or isolated. Visit them *along with* another resident. Show concern and care - bring flowers, a card, or a treat they might like.

4. **Model whole-hearted listening.** While visiting a resident, do your best to listen closely to what they share. Be present. Make a point of looking into their eyes. Nod your head and smile - it makes a world of difference. The resident doing the visiting with you will be encouraged to do the same.
5. **Help residents volunteer in their community.** See a department head or staff member with a resident, and ask if there is something with which they could use help.
6. **Nurture a talent to share with others.** If you notice that a resident has a talent that they aren't putting to use, let them know that you've noticed. Gently encourage them. Offer suggestions of how they can share their talent, e.g. decorate the bare walls. Consider creating a project to do this together as a three-some.
7. **Find a quote or a song that inspires and share it.** Along with a resident, create a basket of short inspiring quotes or find a few recordings of inspirational songs. Then invite a resident to go with you and visit someone who is lonely or struggling and share these inspirations. This facilitates residents helping residents.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup>Cohen-Mansfield, J., Golander, H., Arnhem, G., & Cohen, R. (2014). Reactions and interventions for delusions in nursing home residents with dementia. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias*, *In press*. doi: 10.1177/1533317514522850
- <sup>2</sup>Knight, C., Haslam, S. A., & Haslam, C. (2010). In home or at home? How collective decision making in a new care facility enhances social interaction and wellbeing amongst older adults. *Ageing & Society*, *30*(08), 1393-1418. doi: 10.1017/S0144686X10000656
- <sup>3</sup>Zeisel, J. (2009). *I'm still here: A breakthrough approach to understanding someone living with Alzheimer's*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- <sup>4</sup>Power, G. A. (2010). *Dementia Beyond Drugs: Changing the Culture of Care*. Baltimore: Health Professions Press, Inc.
- <sup>5</sup>Sherwin, S., & Winsby, M. (2011). A relational perspective on autonomy for older adults residing in nursing homes. *Health Expectations*, *14*(2), 182-190. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1369-7625.2010.00638.x>