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## Creative Approaches to Enhancing Relationships with People with Dementia

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# Training Caregivers of People with Dementia in Person-Centered Nonverbal Communication through Creative Dance



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## Introduction

When dementia robs people of their cognitive abilities, they are often left disoriented and without the ability to communicate verbally. Without words, people with dementia are sensitive to nonverbal expressions of approval and disapproval, support, nurturance, rejection, and abandonment through tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, posture, use of space, time, and body attitudes of caregivers.

Person-centered nonverbal communication training improves the ability of caregivers to meet the needs of, and provide emotional safety to, people with neurocognitive disorders through mutually positive interactions. Creative movement and dance/movement therapy teach through emphasizing embodied ways to become more self-reflective, spontaneous, and playful—all vital skills for interacting with persons with dementia.

## Purpose and Hypothesis

This innovative 9-month training program was designed to teach caregivers how their unique nonverbal communication style might be interpreted by people with dementia, how caregivers were affected by nonverbal actions of persons with dementia, and how they might use nonverbal and movement interventions to promote communication in support of genuine relationships.

Sophisticated information about nonverbal communication theory, combined with direct knowledge of personal movement style, when applied strategically, can improve interactions with a person with dementia.

### Nonverbal Communication Training Goals

To Increase	To Reduce
Caregivers' level of empathy towards person with dementia in their care	Number & intensity of catastrophic events between caregiver & person with dementia
Sense of relatedness between caregiver and person with dementia	The frequency and intensity of resistance to bathing, toileting, going to meals, & eating
Willingness to participate in social activities among residents of memory care unit	The frequency or dosage of medications for agitation and anxiety



## Materials and Methods

- Training: monthly at Friends Village – Assisted Living, Woodstown, NJ.
- 20 hours total: February to September
- Additional 16-hour Train the Trainer program completed by six (6) staff.
- Train the Trainer manual published.



Experiential practices included movement observation, attunement through mirroring, and role plays.

- Total 33 participants
  - 33% completed 20 hour training
  - 48% attended at least half classes
- Participants:
  - 24 = Professional and paraprofessional staff of Friends Village
  - 6 = Family members
  - 2 = Seniors from the community
  - 1 = Social work intern

Half of the residents (14) diagnosed with mid to late stage dementia, Parkinson's, or Alzheimer's disease, participated in at least one of the dance/movement therapy and social dance activities.

Experiential and behavioral dance/movement therapy principles informed the training

How a caregiver interacted with nonverbal and bodily communication key skill. Practicing and applying analysis of body movement behaviors to:

- Observe spatial and temporal movement qualities of trainees;
- Mirror body posture and gestures demonstrated by others & trainer;
- Intentional exploration of interpersonal proximity, touch, and attentional focus essential in approach and interactions with person with dementia.



## Results

Multiple evaluation measures were proposed to triangulate data. Following 4 measures contributed to final analysis of nonverbal communication training:

- I. 2 Self-report surveys:
  - a. Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), (Davis, 1980) given pre and post-training to caregivers to measure empathy.

- i. Key finding: Personal Distress sub-scale of personal unease, anxiety, and vulnerability in tense interpersonal situations decreased after the nonverbal communication training. Suggests ability to separate from the distress of the other and to operate more autonomously and confidently.

- b. Interview Questions for Caregivers (piloted by Newman-Bluestein and Oakes) also served as Needs Assessment of skill level pre-training.

- Key finding: 66% report learning effective means to prevent escalating negative behaviors, and specific ways to calm residents.
- Staff caregivers can name and own behaviors that contribute to residents' distress, and so change their actions.

- II. Consultant Observation of care-partner with residents at each training session. All training classes were audio taped, transcribed, and content analysis of themes conducted.

- Key finding: staff caregivers became more skilled movement observers, thus able to see things from residents point of view; more confident in designing person-centered effective interventions.

- III. Video Analysis: Care-partner/resident interactions were scored and analyzed using Laban Movement Analysis (pre-test, post-test). A Certified Movement Analyst (CMA) provided frame-by-frame video viewing to evaluate somatic levels of relatedness in 5 videotaped interactions between care partners and people with dementia.

- a. Able to engage nonverbal communication skills to interact based on accurate observation of residents' actions
- b. Observe spontaneous smiles, shared laughter, and reciprocal affection—an improved quality of life for those in residential care.



Dance/movement therapy groups used nonverbal communication and creative arts to engage persons with dementia and initiate interactions; this increased verbalizations, and promoted liveliness and enjoyment.

## Conclusions



- Embodied learning of targeted nonverbal communication skills, adapted through caregivers' unique movement styles, facilitates genuine person-centered interaction and leads to improved relationships between caregiver and person with dementia.
- Limitations include the small sample size and the need to refine measurement instruments in future replications of the nonverbal communication training.



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