

Cameron Camp, PhD — Applied Gerontologist

THINKING CREATIVELY

Psychologist Cameron Camp, PhD, has taken a teaching method traditionally used on young children and retooled it to help people with Alzheimer's disease regain some of the skills that have fallen prey to their illness.

Commonly known as the Montessori method, this approach to learning has typically been applied in school settings. But Camp's research has shown that this approach to learning, one based on rehabilitation principles, can benefit people in all stages of their lives, and even those with serious cognitive impairment. His adaptation of the research behind the Montessori method for use with Alzheimer's patients is called the Montessori-Based Dementia Programming method.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Camp, director of research and development at the Center for Applied Research in Dementia, believes that people living with Alzheimer's disease still have much to contribute to their families, friends and community members. The goal of his work is to apply or translate findings from other areas of psychology to his work with Alzheimer's patients.

"How can we connect with the person who is still here?" is the first question Camp asks. "Our focus is working with the strengths that remain: finding the person behind the memory problems, engaging the individual and letting everyone involved have a feeling of success and accomplishment."

For example, one Montessori-based skills-building exercise that Camp uses allows Alzheimer's patients to redevelop the motor skills necessary to feed themselves. Individuals use a spoon with slots to dig for objects buried in a tub of rice. When the elderly person finds a "treasure," the rice falls through the slots leaving the object on the spoon.

"We want to flip the system on its ear — to change people's expectations about what people with dementia are capable of," says Camp. "Our job is to allow this person to be present — to help them, wherever they are in the journey of dementia, to be connected with a community and contribute to the best of their ability."

CREATING MEMORIES

Along with the Montessori-Based Dementia Programming method, Camp developed an intervention called "spaced retrieval," which teaches Alzheimer's patients how to recall information over increasingly longer periods of time using objects to help them remember.

"By creating these cognitive prostheses, we can circumvent deficits in memory and executive function and bolster people's sense of accomplishment and self-esteem," says Camp. "If the person you are visiting is happy afterward, it was a good activity and a good visit."



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