A Gem for Dementia Treatment Providers

A Review of

Treating Dementia in Context: A Step-by-Step Guide to Working With Individuals and Families
by Susan M. McCurry and Claudia Drossel
doi: 10.1037/a0024384

Reviewed by
Paul L. Craig, David J. Sperbeck

Looking for a gem? Susan M. McCurry and Claudia Drossel have written one. *Treating Dementia in Context: A Step-by-Step Guide to Working With Individuals and Families* provides a useful, evidence-based blueprint for professionals who work with the consequences of a dementing illness. McCurry and Drossel provide helpful conceptual models, specific procedures, and clinical examples as they illustrate effective and humane techniques for evaluation and intervention with individuals and family members dealing with a dementia.

Although the authors understand the importance of the neuropsychological aspects of a dementing illness (e.g., sensory impairment, agnosia, aphasia, apraxia, amnesia, executive dysfunction, disinhibition, and so forth), their emphasis is on the intrapersonal and interpersonal issues—namely, understanding the emotional and cognitive landscape of the dementing individual with an emphasis on optimizing the context in which the dementing individual is attempting to function.

Setting the stage for the reader, McCurry describes the failure she experienced year after year when attempting to find even one agate on a beach in Washington among a myriad of colored pebbles and rocks. Her friend had enjoyed frequent success on the same beach. She uses this story as a metaphor to capture a primary challenge of dementia care—identifying the variables that are important, with a particular focus on context. Reading this book felt like discovering a valuable gem among the burgeoning clinically oriented dementia literature.

McCurry and Drossel provide caregivers with a systematic approach to incorporating the dementing person’s unique traits into effective care plans. DANCE (McCurry, 2006) is an acronym for a model the authors use when working with health care colleagues, trainees, and family caregivers. DANCE captures five core strategies: Discuss respectfully; Ameliorate excess disability; Nurture the dyad; Create contextual solutions; and Enjoy the journey.

In a touching clinical example that very concretely exemplifies DANCE, the authors describe how a husband learned that he could use ballroom dancing to get his cognitively impaired wife to willingly enter the shower. This husband and wife had enjoyed dancing throughout their marriage. Before the husband discovered this contextual intervention, getting her to bathe had been a daily struggle. Reading about his version of, well, dancing in the rain concretized DANCE for us. However, applications of DANCE extend far beyond this vignette.

The book is designed to help professionals understand on a case-by-case basis the etiology of emotional and behavioral changes in dementia patients. Providers are encouraged to individualize assessment and intervention to optimize the care recipient’s quality of life and autonomy. The authors emphasize how professionals can enable the dementia care recipients to stay connected with meaningful relationships to both their loved ones and other caregivers. Drawing from the E of DANCE, the authors remind the reader to “enjoy the journey” in the context of delivery of individualized and
contextualized professional services for dementia.

McCurry and Drossel provide a cogent and evidence-based analysis of the functional relationship between behavior and context, carefully analyzing the dementia care recipient’s behavioral antecedents and consequences associated with identified problem behaviors. They emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing the dementia care recipient’s strengths, weaknesses, and personal history when considering current contextual issues. Professionals are encouraged to optimize the available environmental resources to result in the best emotional and behavioral outcomes for the individual with dementia and for the family caregivers.

The American Psychological Association’s 2010 president, Carol Goodheart, emphasized caregiver issues during her presidential term. The American Psychological Association’s Family Caregiver Briefcase for Psychologists is now available (http://www.apa.org/pi/about/publications/caregivers/index.aspx) as a result of Goodheart’s presidential initiative. In the context of discussing caregivers, McCurry and Drossel remind the reader that contented, if not happy, flight attendants increase the likelihood that passengers will enjoy their flight and behave pleasantly. Likewise, this book encourages professionals to focus on the emotional well-being of caregivers to improve the behavioral and emotional outcomes among care recipients.

Methods and techniques are reviewed that can be used for discussing presenting concerns with dementia care recipients. At all times, the authors emphasize respectful and professional communication, with multiple examples of strategies and approaches used in their practice. The book emphasizes the importance of understanding why dementia symptoms can be more debilitating than might otherwise be predicted due to the added burden of physical and psychiatric comorbid conditions.

The authors provide excellent practical strategies for addressing problem behaviors in dementia care recipients such as unsafe driving, diminished self-care, verbal and physical aggression, and wandering. They also offer a useful and systematic approach to addressing and resolving these problem behaviors through the use of contextual and behavioral analysis.

_Treating Dementia in Context_ is not only pragmatic—it is also well written. The book provides detailed, step-by-step advice for gathering information, building rapport, communicating effectively with patients who are cognitively impaired, and conducting a functional analysis of each individual’s presenting concerns.

Suggestions are provided for improving caregivers’ patience, using humor, individualizing care, and providing help to individuals with dementia when help is not wanted. Hence, this book is a very appropriate and useful resource not just for behavioral health professionals and other professional caregivers, but also for family, loved ones, and other caregivers who are involved with an individual with dementia.

The authors provide useful recommendations for evaluating and responding to patient or caregiver noncompliance with medication regimens. Certainly, for those of us who have family members and/or clients who suffer from a progressive dementia, recognizing, understanding, and addressing treatment plan noncompliance are frequent problems that require caregiver vigilance and patience, followed by appropriate education and redirection. The book is helpful in that respect.

Valuable guidance for preserving the relationship between dementia care recipients and their loved ones by redefining expectations, roles, and responses to dilemmas is one among many highlights of this book. McCurry and Drossel emphasize the importance of maintaining affection between dementia patients and their loved ones through behavioral and contextual functional analysis designed to increase intimacy, friendship, and trust. The book emphasizes the importance of professionals and caregivers recognizing and preserving key role identities for the dementia care recipient as long as possible in order to maintain a sense of self and connection with the social fabric.

Some of the authors’ suggestions are deliberately novel, consistent with the unique and diverse lifestyles found among our aging population as well as among younger caregivers. In these circumstances, the authors recognize that unconventional approaches and solutions merit consideration.

Sexuality in dementia care recipients and their spouses is a frequently ignored issue. These issues are addressed in the
book in a compassionate, practical, and nonjudgmental manner. The authors clearly are experienced and provide a cogent and detailed description of appropriate responses to such problems as accusations of infidelity, attachment between institutional residents, and other nuances of sexuality and intimacy that can emerge in the context of a progressive dementing disorder.

The authors address other practical dilemmas that invariably arise during a dementia caregiver’s journey. One such topic is the issue of caregivers providing erroneous data, by design, which the authors describe as providing compassionate misinformation. The authors note that the practice of providing erroneous information should be cautiously applied and generally limited to situations in which problems and conflicts can be defused. The authors appropriately discuss that deliberate use of misinformation is often contraindicated, especially when the individual with a dementia can understand and make beneficial use of factual information.

_Treating Dementia in Context_ is a valuable guide for professionals who want to understand the consequences of dementia when providing treatment and supportive services. It provides an evidence-based and compassionate model of treatment of dementia focused on improving the quality of life for dementia care recipients and their caregivers. The authors emphasize the importance of individually and contextually analyzing the mood, behavioral, and social changes that accompany progressive dementia.

Using a very personal yardstick to measure the impact of this book, both of us noticed that after reading _Treating Dementia in Context_ we each began dealing with our respective elderly parents more effectively and humanely. Just like the agates described by McCurry in her introduction, readers will find that this book is a gem containing layer after layer of fascinating and clinically useful content.

**Reference**