

# Mind Game

**'Bingo with words' game developed in Akron tested nationwide as aid to Alzheimer's patients**

**By Cheryl Powell  
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Alzheimer's disease is a cruel intruder that unrelentingly takes over a person's brain and steals memories and skills, bit by agonizing bit. Routine daily activities become struggles. Loved ones turn into strangers.

But a local company has developed a program to let people with Alzheimer's and related forms of dementia use and enjoy the skills they have left in a social setting.

The Memory Magic game is being tested with the backing of federal money at several nursing homes and assisted living centers nationwide, including Arden Courts Alzheimer's Assisted Living center in Fairlawn.

The game, marketed by Creative Action of Akron, "is kind of a combination of bingo with words," said Anthony Sterns, the company's vice president of research.

"The idea is to create a game that's easily played by a large group of people with minimal staff." But unlike bingo, Memory Magic doesn't have any little chips that can be hard to handle.

Finding activities that occupy patients with dementia in a group setting is a growing demand that is expected to increase in coming years, as the baby boomers age and become at risk for age-related illnesses.

An estimated 4.5 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease, according to the Alzheimer's Association, a national



Ed Suba Jr, ABJ photo

Stella Reed (left) and Bea Woodling, residents at Arden Courts, ponder their next choices in a game of Memory Magic, the game made in Akron and being tested nationwide.

Wednesday, Sep 22, 2004

advocacy group. By 2050, that number is expected to grow to 11.3 million to 16 million. The concept for Memory Magic was developed by researchers at the Myers Research Institute in the Menorah Park Center for Senior Living in Beachwood.

Creative Action and the Myers Research Institute got about \$1.2 million in federal research grants to continue studying the concept and bring the game to the marketplace.

Here's how Memory Magic works: Participants slide a plastic-coated game card into a game board with nine windows each covered by movable shades. A game leader gives the players clues until one of the

participants figure out the answer. Players then read the words through the windows on their game board and flip the shade up if they have the answer. Participants win when they have flipped up all the shades, but most game leaders continue playing until everyone wins, Sterns said.

## Failure-Free Environment

When planning activities for people with Alzheimer's disease, creating routine and structure is vital; it's important to put the focus on the skills they still have, not the things they can no longer do, according to the Fisher Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation, a nonprofit agency at Rockefeller University in New York City.

“In general, it's not competitive. It's a failure-free emphasis,” Sterns said. Perhaps surprisingly to many people, Sterns said, Alzheimer's patients often maintain their ability to read, even as their disease progresses.

The reason, Sterns said, is that Alzheimer's works backward, stealing most-recently learned skills and knowledge first. Since people learn to read early during their education, this is often one of the last skills they lose.

The leaders' clue cards also contain suggested follow-up questions to help spawn discussions, Sterns said. Some even have lyrics to old-time songs the leaders can sing with elderly game players.

On a recent morning at Arden Courts, 13 residents gathered around tables as two activity directors led the game. Before the game started, the residents were distracted, often getting up from their seats or, in some cases, moaning. But once the game boards were distributed, most of them paid attention to the game leaders.

During the first round, players tried to figure out opposite words using the clues read by Stacey Coulson, program service coordinator at Arden Courts.

“The opposite of good is... ” Coulson paused, waiting for an answer. “Bad!” a resident yelled, smiling proudly.

“Who can tell me a word that rhymes with bad?” Coulson prompted. “Glad!” one resident yelled. “Sad,” another said.

“What are some things that are bad for your health?” Coulson asked. “Not the proper eating,” someone responded. “Smoking,” said another.

Ruth Fuhrman, 84, enthusiastically yelled out answers to many of the questions. Fuhrman said she enjoys playing the game.

“I'm always up for anything new,” she said. Marsene Parker, 81, agreed. “It passes the time,” she said. “I think it keeps us alert. You can learn little things.”

As the residents played, researchers from Creative Action watched for what they call “signs of engagement.” Were the participants paying attention? Smiling? Laughing? Talking?

“We've had a lot of fun with it,” Coulson said of the game. “It's nice to have something new that is successful to do with the residents.”

## Focus

But it's not all fun and games. People with Alzheimer's disease often experience changes in their personalities and behavioral problems, such as agitation, anxiety, delusions and hallucinations, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

“With Alzheimer's, it's not unusual for someone to display aggressive behaviors,” said Yvonne Owens, Arden Court's executive director. But patients who are prone to acting out can do better when they're busy, she said.

“It's going to decrease behaviors and give them something to focus on,” she said.

Testing is ongoing at several facilities here and nationwide, including assisted living and nursing homes in Washington, D.C., and at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Creative Action is securing another \$400,000 from investors to begin selling the product in January, Sterns said.

The Memory Magic game, which includes 10 game boards and enough cards to play 15 rounds, will retail for about \$400.

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