RESIDENTS AT SOME LTC FACILITIES ARE PLAYING "MIND GAMES" TO IMPROVE THEIR COGNITIVE ABILITIES

Lou LaPadula’s memory and attention span aren’t what they used to be. That became noticeably evident to the 89-year-old resident of Wartburg Adult Care Community, Mount Vernon, NY, when he found himself struggling with an activity he’s enjoyed all his life.

“I couldn’t complete the easiest of crossword puzzles,” said LaPadula. “I would get frustrated pretty quickly and give up.”

Instead of quitting his favorite pastime, about a year ago, LaPadula decided to take part in a workout program — for his brain.

“Now I am able to complete harder crossword puzzles and even jumbles, which I have never been able to do,” LaPadula said. “My thinking is clearer and I get less confused.”

LTC facilities like Wartburg are starting to utilize these so-called brain exercise programs in an effort to help residents stay mentally sharp and perhaps ward off cognitive deterioration.

These activities, which include computer and traditional board games, are designed to engage the brain’s neuroplasticity, which controls its natural ability to change. They also strengthen connections between healthy neurons and compensate to offset the damage done by different forms of dementia, said Pamela Atwood, MA (gerontology), director of dementia care services at Hebrew Health Care, West Hartford, CT.

“These brain programs offer people hope” said Atwood, who also does work with the Connecticut chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association. “It gives people with dementia an opportunity to actively stimulate their brain instead of just taking medication and hoping it works.”

MAGIC MOMENTS

While some facility administrators are turning to technology to help improve their residents’ cognitive health, another assisted living network is sticking to a more traditional activity to meet this goal — board games.

Eighteen months ago, Golden Living, which operates assisted living facilities throughout the country including the Mid-Atlantic region, began using Memory Magic as part of its dementia-care program activities. Janice Mullen, division director of quality life, claims that Memory Magic, marketed by Creative Actions, Akron, OH, is different than bingo and other typical games residents play.

“Bingo doesn’t require much interaction and can take a long time to complete,” she said. “Residents tend to lose interest and don’t want to participate.”

After learning about the game from a former colleague, Mullen helped implement Memory Magic into Golden Living facilities in November 2005. She claims the game is a great activity for residents of all cognitive abilities.

Designed to be played for an hour, two times per week, Memory Magic stimulates social interaction and helps reduce disruptive resident behavior by encouraging group participation, Mullen said.

To begin the game, an activity leader announces the beginning of a sentence or phrase. Participants try to complete it by flashing clue cards with the right words. Players participate by reading the clue cards aloud, answering the questions, responding to hints and taking part in discussions related to each question.

The cards can also be adapted to include follow-up questions to help spur conversation, said Mullen. For example, if the group is asked, “What is a word that rhymes with mad?” and a resident answers “bad,” the game leader could ask the group what things are associated with bad health. The goal is to keep users involved. This is especially important for people with dementia, Mullen said.

“Residents with dementia often have problematic behaviors such as wandering and agitation because they are bored,” she explained. “Memory Magic gives patients who are prone to these behaviors something to do to keep them busy while also helping to improve their memory.”

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