

Why the Montessori Method is Becoming a Popular Treatment for Dementia

May 27, 2014, Alzheimer's Research, Mark Huntsman

The Montessori method is being used to successfully engage Alzheimer's disease patients, and it's an idea that's gaining traction in the caregiving community. While it's still a new approach, there is already evidence that the Montessori approach can reduce anxiety for people with dementia by providing them with engaging activities that they find rewarding.

Developed in the early 20th century, the Montessori method of teaching holds that when you're working with children, you must consider their needs and capabilities in concert. What do they like to do? What are they able to do? The balancing act the teacher performs centres on not challenging the students – you don't want them to get frustrated and give up – but rather, making the task a little beyond their comfort zone, so they still have the opportunity to learn and improve. The same is true for those with Alzheimer's.

Connecting the Montessori Method to Alzheimer's

One way to think about why the Montessori method is gaining traction with Alzheimer's carers is this: Montessori teachers create lessons and activities specifically designed to engage the senses. The more ways students are given to connect with the world they're learning about for the first time, the more their brains become engaged, which means more opportunities for the new information to become long-term memory.

The Montessori method of caregiving has a very similar goal: engaging the senses in order to help Alzheimer's and dementia patients and loved ones rediscover the world around them. Providing the most effective care means maximizing the opportunities these patients have to reconnect with a world they're losing access to. Researchers and carers are increasingly finding that sensory experiences created through physical activities and art or music therapy, gives loved ones with Alzheimer's positive emotions that they may have lost the ability to experience.

Though a patient may become withdrawn or paranoid as dementia advances, in many cases, their long-term memories will be largely well-preserved. The Montessori method is about providing ways to connect with those memories. Presenting a loved one with fresh flowers and an empty vase may give him or her a way to step out of a sense of isolation and into a beautiful spring day, because the experience of putting the flowers in the vase is enough to powerfully call forth the memory of cutting fresh flowers, for instance.

The positive attitudes and personal touch that are hallmarks of the Montessori method help carers maximize their loved ones' opportunities to reconnect with pleasant events of the past, and to re-experience the accompanying positive emotions.

How Carers Can Put the Montessori Method into Play

Dr. Cameron Camp, a psychologist in applied gerontology, discovered that the Montessori method could be adapted into the basis of a new approach to dementia care. Dr. Camp states the problem this way: “How can we connect with the person who is still here?”

One answer to this question is to use the Montessori approach to re-engage the types of memory that are spared by dementia, including motor memory such as how to dress and how to eat. An example of a skills-building activity that Dr. Camp employs involves Alzheimer’s patients using a slotted spoon to dig in a tub of dry rice for objects that are buried beneath the surface. When they find a “treasure,” the rice falls through the slots, leaving the object on the spoon. In the process, their brains are re-learning the motor skills that are necessary to feed yourself.

“We want to flip the system on its ear,” Dr. Camp says, “to change people’s expectations about what people with dementia are capable of. 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.”

Let’s take a look at different ways carers can put Montessori into practice.

1. Prep tables with materials for activities such as puzzles, sorting exercises and other games.
2. Lay out a basket of clean towels to fold.
3. Have a basket of clean socks that need to be matched and folded.
4. Put out a bin of plastic plumbing tubes that can be connected and put together.
5. For advanced dementia patients who may take comfort in holding dolls, a series of dolls and doll clothes can make for a pleasurable activity.
6. For those who enjoy cooking or baking, a safe kitchen environment and baking ingredients.

What we’re increasingly learning is that dementia patients can come to not only enjoy the process of participating in something they used to regularly do, but also come away with a definite sense of accomplishment that can help improve their quality of life.