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Birches' Dementia Education Series Kicks Off with Surprising Secret to Dementia Communication

Tami Neumann delivered a presentation at The Birches Assisted Living in Clarendon Hills on September 22 titled "IMPROVe Dementia Communication©" with fellow dementia care expert Catherine Braxton. The presentation highlighted the surprising benefits that come from applying the rules of improv comedy to dementia communication.

Clarendon Hills, IL, September 27, 2015 --([PR.com](#))-- One of the last places you'd think to look for inspiration in dementia care is improv comedy, but according to Certified Dementia Practitioner and Conversations in Care podcast host Tami Neumann, the two disciplines have a lot more in common than you'd think.

Neumann delivered a presentation at The Birches Assisted Living in Clarendon Hills on September 22 titled "IMPROVe Dementia Communication©" with fellow dementia care expert Catherine Braxton. The presentation highlighted the surprising benefits that come from applying the rules of improv comedy to dementia communication.

Although the connection between dementia communication and improv comedy is not immediately apparent to the untrained eye, Neumann, who has over 20 years of experience in the dementia care industry, was instantly struck by the correlation between the two disciplines while attending her son's improv class.

"I'm watching my son and laughing, when all of the sudden it hit me like a ton of bricks— all of the rules that he's learning in improv apply perfectly to working with someone with dementia," said Neumann.

According to Neumann, the first rule of improv is to, regardless of the scenario presented, say, "Yes, and..." In other words, when your improv partner suggests an action or sets a scene you should always agree to it and then elaborate on it to further the skit. Failing to heed this rule, says Neumann, can leave your skit dead in the water—and can do the same for your interaction with a loved one who has dementia.

"When someone with dementia says something that seems a little bit off the wall or wacky or they are in the past, the best response is to just be in the moment and ask them to tell you more," said Neumann. "You can reframe some of the things they say and have a really meaningful moment if you're not so tied to the idea that you have to bring them into reality."

The first rule of improv also relates perfectly to the piece of advice that Neumann says is most important for family members or caregivers of people with dementia to understand: they should step into their loved one's world, rather than trying to drag their loved one back into theirs. According to Neumann, the dementia care industry used to promote a therapeutic approach called reality orientation, which attempted to force those with dementia to get back in touch with reality, but often left them confused and frustrated. Today, she prefers the approach of meeting a person with dementia wherever they are.

The other rule that Neumann says applies just as much to dementia communication as it does to improv comedy is, "Don't ask questions." Neumann does, however, amend this rule slightly to say, "Only ask smart questions." In improv this rule means that you should only ask questions that will move the scene forward, and avoid questions that will stall what's happening. For many improv artists, this rule means only asking questions that add new information. Similarly, when interacting with someone who has dementia, avoid useless questions that will leave them feeling frustrated or agitated. You should also avoid asking them one question after the next, after the next.

"If we just start asking someone with dementia question after question, like what they want to eat, what they want to drink or whether they remember something, a wall is going to come up. They are going to be agitated, and we're going to be agitated," said Neumann. "So, it's important to ask them smart questions rather than just bombarding them with questions."


Neumann says it's best to ask them questions that encourage reminiscence and make them want to engage in conversation. The key to doing so, she says, is to really think about each question before you ask it to gauge their potential response, deciding whether the question is going to stall the conversation, cause them to shut down or irritate them.

One of the greatest benefits to using the improv approach to dementia communication, says Neumann, is that it is simple and can be applied immediately in any situation. Family members or others that interact with people who have dementia daily don't need extensive training to apply these principles-- and for those struggling to communicate with someone they love, this simplicity can be incredibly refreshing.

"We really want to help people feel at ease communicating with their friends and family members with dementia. This improv technique is a tool they can have in their wheelhouse and use when they need it," said Neumann. "I think this is the tool that they really need most to better communicate with their loved ones."

The Birches Assisted Living in Clarendon Hills is a premier retirement community dedicated to providing professional services that support its residents' physical, social, intellectual and spiritual growth. The Birches offers a full calendar of purposeful programs and activities designed to promote a healthy aging lifestyle and a strong sense of community. For more information about The Birches, call 630-789-1135 or visit: birches.net.

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