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Easing the painful puzzle of dementia

Local Practitioner Pens Book To Help Caregivers Of Dementia Sufferers

SAM SMITH / TRI-CITIES NOW
SEPTEMBER 25, 2013

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Coquitlam dementia practitioner Karen Tyrell has written a book meant to shine a light on treatment options for those providing care to dementia sufferers. Photograph by: Lisa King

"Memory is like an onion.

It's a good analogy for somebody suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

"It's like they're going backwards in time, and all those layers are their memories. They're slowly going inward, and they may firmly believe they're in a file folder of their past. They're sort of stuck there at the moment, so we need to go into their reality and help them."

This is the key philosophy Karen Tyrell, a Coquitlam resident, certified dementia practitioner, and now author of *Cracking the Dementia Code*, follows.

"I worked in a care home for 14 years helping residents with all stages of Dementia," Tyrell said. "I had a different viewpoint on how to assist these residents, especially using non-drug approaches."

A perfect example was when she was helping a man named Clarence, Tyrell said.

"He was desperate to leave the care home, and he was trying every door to get out," she recalls. "He was frustrated and kept saying he wanted to go home."

Caretakers didn't know what to do, according to Tyrell, and the next step normally would have been to drug him after he started getting aggressive. Instead, Tyrell recalls asking him why he wanted to go home.

"He said because he wanted to milk the cows," she said. "He was back in time. There was no convincing him the farm was sold."

So she came up with the best solution she could - she tried to figure out where he was in his mind and soothe him from that reality.

"We need to go into their reality as caregivers," she said. "So my response was telling him, 'The cows have already been milked today.'" After that, Tyrell says Clarence calmed down and she was able to get him to relax. If not, she believes he would have been drugged, which Tyrell says should not be the first response.

This is why she wrote *Cracking the Dementia Code*, a book for family and frontline workers about her personally found strategies on how to calmly and creatively approach a person suffering from Dementia or Alzheimer's.

Penning those thoughts to paper was not a choice, it was a necessity, according to Tyrell. And now that it's done she couldn't be happier.

"It's indescribable," she said. "I just get goosebumps every time I think that this is happening. It's like a dream come true. It was on my bucket list."

Now that the book's published, she's going to be doing a world tour over the next year speaking on her philosophies on treatment.

Helping caregivers connect with the patient within was her primary goal, she said.

"My passion for dementia started when I was in college doing my first college diploma,"

she said. "I was doing a student placement at the same time. I got to see the inappropriate approaches that the staff were doing, which really bothered me."

She recalls staff snapping and ordering patients around, ordering them to stay put without relieving any of the anxiety, stress, or fear they felt.

Through her practice, she has found numerous ways to connect and comfort those facing dementia, and means in which to ease some of the stress that caregivers face on a daily basis.

She has written about her ideas and experience on her website www.dementiasolutions.ca.

Tyrell hopes her book can change how caregivers approach a person suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's.

"I just really want caregivers to understand the importance of education," she said.

To order her book, or find out more about dementia and treatment, visit www.dementiasolutions.ca.

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