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Walking a mile in ill-fitting shoes

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My feet are absolutely killing me, and it's not from the 10,000 steps I have been walking daily to kick the new year off on the right foot. The spring in my step has been hampered by the plastic-spiked gel inserts that have been stuffed into my shoes (voluntarily) during a "Virtual Dementia Tour" hosted by Watercrest Senior Living Community. The tour was designed to enhance empathy and understanding for those who are suffering from memory loss or a dementia related illness. I literally learned how "out of step" one can feel when the mind and body are out of sync.

Ann SanCartier, community relations director at the Lake Nona campus, which specializes in both assisted living and memory care, suggested I walk a 1/10 of mile in the shoes of the aged, and help expand the program's reach by sharing it with readers. Following a warm welcome and a tour of the state-of-the-art facility, she stressed, the "resident-specific care" of each Watercrest resident as the community's primary focus, with every caregiver a certified dementia practitioner.

As the tour began, Brittney Winston of Senior Helpers, sponsor of the event along with Compass Research, loaded me (and the participants) with age-simulation gear. We were given special glasses, mimicking blurred eyesight and a limited field of vision from cataracts/glaucoma/degeneration. Bulky gloves modeled neuropathy, arthritis, and movement related ailments. After passing out thick headphones, creating hearing impairment and sound distortion, we were given a list of tasks to complete inside a model apartment.

I entered a room, which had just a small amount of ambient lighting, trying to concentrate on the two tasks I was able to understand. Unfortunately, the other tasks I had been assigned had been absorbed into my clunky headset, which every so often made me spasm from ear-splitting sounds. Sheena Jeffries, Watercrest's memory care director, sat at an out-of-the-way table to make sure we remained safe. She appeared merely as an outline of a person through the distortion of my lens (later, I was introduced to her warm presence and explosive smile). Still, it was comforting to know that we were not in this all alone.

I completed my two tasks, badly. I asked the attendant if she could help with the rest. Of course I couldn't hear her reply, but she handed me a list, which appeared to be a random array of letters (mimicking word processing challenges). As I ambled to the window to get more reading light, seemingly out of nowhere, an ambulance siren whipped through my ears. I regained my composure and decoded a job or two. Alas time was up, and the mystery tasks went uncompleted.

Following the virtual tour (created by Second Wind Dreams), Winston debriefed us. She is quite the "senior helper" and brought us comfort as she broke down our encounter in the "Land of the Lost." We shared our collective experiences. Words like "confused" and "overwhelmed" abounded. Simple, everyday tasks became nearly impossible with limited vision, hampered movement and interrupted thoughts.

Just like residents with memory care issues, each participant experienced a challenge (or symptom) more than the others. For me, it was the chronic foot pain. The gel inserts felt almost like tacks stabbing at my feet

(simulating neuropathy, bunions, and chronic pain). Ann SanCartier hardly noticed the foot discomfort. For her, the greatest challenge was the noise that rang out at random times (representing impaired sensory processing).

Sheena Jeffries positively concluded that it was the goal of the exercise to allow family members to better understand what this “new version of mom or dad” was going through. Perhaps, by stepping into their shoes we could “learn to listen between the lines, and appreciate the moment”.

When I was back in my comfortable shoes, I thought back to a chat I had earlier that day with a resident in his late 80s. I mentioned my new walking routine to Bob, my seatmate in the waiting area. He commented his wife walked 15-to-20,000 steps a day and was sharp as a tack. Tomorrow, I plan on appreciating the moment, renewing that spring in my step, and upping my step count.

If you are interested in a “Virtual Dementia Tour,” contact Watercrest Living at 407-226-3113 or visit watercrestseniorliving.com. To find out more about Senior Helpers, seniorhelpers.com/orlando

Tidbits from the Sandwich Generation is a series of blogs by Pamela Ruben, marketing and communications director for the Jewish Pavilion, about managing the multi-generations. If you are sandwiched in between raising a family of children or young adults, and caring for aging parents, take a bite out of life with this new blog! Just a ‘tidbit’ is recommended for anyone who spends time with older adults, or is preparing for life’s next stages. Laugh, cry, and relate as our blogger is pulled from all sides by family members young and old. Check out additional posts at jewishpavilion.org/blog. For no cost help for issues pertaining to older adults contact the Orlando Senior Help Desk, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, at 407-678-9363 or visit orlandoseniorhelpdesk.org

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