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## Coping with Dementia: Seek ways to keep your loved one engaged

Jun 3, 2022



When we decide to focus on the abilities our loved ones retain, it is amazing what we can help them achieve. MetroCreative



CC Debbie Selsavage Coping with Dementia column sig mug Selsavage

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Often, during counseling or while facilitating my care partner support groups, I hear the lament, "My husband (wife) can't do anything! Not a thing!"

Since most of these care partners are talking about a loved one who is still verbal and ambulatory, I know their complaint is simply not true. Yes, this is how they may see their situation, but I have learned that what they are really saying is "My loved one can't do the things I want them to do," or, "They can't do the things they used to do."



Selsavage

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Too often, we, as care partners, base our expectations on what our loved one used to do. This causes us to focus on the abilities they are losing, not the abilities they retain.

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I once encouraged a care partner to join a memory café where her husband could paint and draw. She responded, almost in disgust, "He won't do that! He was a civil engineer!" It was as if I had insulted him, but after I persuaded her to give it a try, it turned out that he absolutely loved painting and drawing. Though his mind could no longer perform the complex functions of engineering, the act of using his hands to create gave him joy and satisfaction. Who cares that he was creating simple colorful shapes rather than a bridge or a highway?

Once the care partner became willing to adjust her expectations, she found that the memory café provided her husband pleasure and sociability, but it also provided her respite and the opportunity to learn and share with other care partners.

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When we decide to focus on the abilities our loved ones retain, it is amazing what we can help them achieve. For example, health and economic development agencies in the Netherlands have pooled their resources to create an agricultural program that enables seniors and individuals living with dementia to work on farms, performing useful tasks within their range of capabilities.

This program provides meaningful work and exercise in the sunshine and open air of agricultural settings based on a simple philosophy: Rather than design care around what people can no longer do, design it to leverage and emphasize what they still can accomplish. This experiment began in the late 1990s, and today care farming is well established and is gathering interest across Europe.

This approach to dementia and senior care – based on ability rather than disability – has actually become part of a movement within the Netherlands to reduce the use of institutionalized care in favor of training care partners and families to continue to provide home-based care.

The result is that today there are more than 1,300 care farms in the country, 400 of which specialize in creating opportunities for individuals living with dementia!

A great deal has been published on this movement. To learn more, just Google "Care farms in the Netherlands."

Personally, I think it is a wonderful trend simply because ... We all deserve the best!

Debbie Selsavage is a certified trainer and consultant in the Positive Approach to Care, and a certified dementia practitioner. Her company, Coping with Dementia LLC, is dedicated to making life better for individuals living with dementia. Contact her at [deb@coping.today](mailto:deb@coping.today) to learn about free support groups online.

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