



HOLISTIC DEMENTIA CARE

by Lisa Moore

After spending 10 years in leadership roles inside the dementia care industry, Ellen Belk was frustrated with the current methods of care, knowing that dementia care is most effective when caregivers have specific and ongoing education. But with many professional providers being focused on the bottom line, that wasn't the norm.

"When operating budgets are being created, staff training and education tends to be one of the first-line items to be cut. Yet, for those with dementia, it's critical that their care environment be a nurturing, welcoming and safe place. It's even more crucial for caregivers to 'speak dementia' effectively. It's a learned skill-set that takes time to perfect and a valuable component to providing quality care," said Belk.

In 2011, she founded Keep In Mind, Inc. with a mission to deliver holistic dementia care solutions to family and professional care partners through advocacy, education and consulting services. Belk uses a four pillar philosophy of holistic care solutions that recognizes environment, communication, nutrition and activity engagement.

"I encourage folks to focus on these areas first, instead of going directly to pharmacological solutions. It's well documented that toxic medications can have a serious and long lasting impact on those with dementia, often shaving years off the person's life. And that's unfortunate and not necessary," she said.

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Treating the symptoms of Alzheimer's, such as aggression and combativeness, with antipsychotic drugs has become controversial because of the harsh side effects as well as risk of death. According to WebMD.com, nearly 40 percent of dementia patients living in nursing homes receive antipsychotic drugs, which have not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat dementia. The FDA has issued a rare "Black Box Warning" stating that patients taking antipsychotics face a risk of death 1.6 to 1.7 times greater than those who take a placebo. The site also states that only an estimated 20 to 30 percent of dementia patients show even marginal improvement.

"In reality, those aggressive behaviors are actually communication methods. Truthfully, they are having adverse reactions to something in their environment or some other stimuli or issue. And because of their dementia they are incapable of telling us exactly what is wrong. Therefore, they are communicating those unmet needs to us in the only way they are capable. More often than not by eliminating environmental triggers or making small adjustments to care methods or delivery, we are able to alleviate their discomfort," Belk said.

Being trained to "speak dementia" helps to utilize effective verbal and

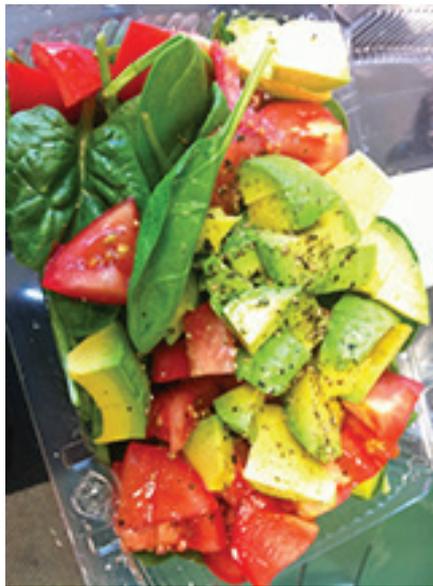
non-verbal communication tactics that validate and nurture those with the disease, minimizing agitation and frustration.

Belk also encourages caregivers to use food as medicine by supporting overall wellness with nutrient rich foods, which is crucial for those with dementia. Maintaining hydration is also important and often neglected. An elder with severe dehydration may actually begin to show signs and symptoms that can be confused with dementia. When properly hydrated, symptoms like forgetfulness may disappear.

Memory Mealz is a free resource Belk designed for anyone who needs healthful yet simple mealtime inspiration. Too often, family caregivers take short-cuts at mealtime and reach for pre-packaged or fast food items. Unfortunately those are wasted and useless calories for folks with dementia. Mealz Club members receive five ingredients or less recipes directly in their inbox every other month.

"My Mom, who is the primary caregiver for my Dad, is a Mealz Club member and she has made every recipe multiple times. Plus, we also include adaptive food options for those who are cooking for people who may not be able to use utensils anymore," stated Belk.

Another effective tool Belk developed are *Memory Magz* - magazine-style picture publications for those with dementia. Magz are full-page, vibrant photos that are visually stimulating, adult-friendly activity options. Currently, two issues are available - *Happy Faces and Outdoor Beauty*. She also created a conversa-



The Keep in Mind program focuses on nutrient rich foods which are crucial for those with dementia.

tion-starter tool that helps and guides caregivers in establishing a reminiscing conversation.

Keep in Mind's primary clients are small to mid-size professional dementia care providers for whom they provide operational solutions and staff training. Belk also tries to reach family caregivers who maintain a full or part time job. Employees who balance care and career have higher healthcare costs due to their stress and impact the companies bottom line in lost productivity due to care concerns. She created Caregiving 411, a workplace wellness initiative to serve this population she feels is underserved. Corporations and small businesses can add Caregiving 411 to their health and wellness benefits packages.

With 1 in 8 folks over the age of 65 having some form of dementia, most people will be impacted in some way, whether it be via a family member or friend. By creating dementia-friendly environments and having caregivers who "speak dementia," Belk believes we can have a positive impact on a fast-growing segment of society.

"At Keep In Mind we want to make sure that folks understand that although there is no cure for dementia, often there are years of living left to do after diagnosis. We want to be agents of change in the stigmatization of dementia. We want folks to be given opportunities to live-out-loud and not hide away in isolation."

For information, KeepInMindInc.com.

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