

Local homes use various methods to care for residents' memories

By MIKE COSTANZA

Age-related memory problems and mild cognitive impairments are a common part of aging. In our later years, we might temporarily forget friends' names, depend more and more on lists to keep our days organized, or find the car keys have developed the habit of wandering around the house.

Illnesses, injuries, medical treatments or mental health issues can cause such losses or impairments. In some cases, they cause dementia, which is not a formal diagnosis, but an umbrella term for a set of symptoms.

"Dementia is the total progressive process that includes memory loss and decline in function," says Dr. Lisa Downing-Forget, a geriatric physician and the medical director of six local nursing homes for seniors.

In addition to progressive declines in the ability to remember, reason or mentally function in other ways, those who have dementia can also experience personality changes, depression, anxiety, physical problems and other difficulties—including behavioral issues.

"Greater than 70 percent of patients with dementia will wander at some point in time," Downing-Forget says.

Four types of dementias result from irreversible damage to the brain. That caused by Alzheimer's disease, in which high levels of certain proteins in the brain interfere with its functioning, is the most common. Vascular dementia, which occurs when stroke or other conditions have damaged the blood vessels that serve the brain, takes second place.

"Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia make up about two-thirds of all dementias," Downing-Forget explains.

Less common are frontotemporal and Lewy body dementia. According to one researcher, 10.5 percent of U.S. residents 65 years old or older had dementia as of 2012.

There are no cures for Alzheimer's and the other progressive diseases. Local residential facilities for seniors take steps to try to reduce their effects, particularly upon the memories of those they care for.

Most of the 206 seniors who reside on the Rochester Presbyterian Home's campuses—The Homestead, Memory Care Residences at Cottage Grove and Memory Care Residences at Creekstone—suffer from some form of dementia. Of that number, 169 receive a degree of memory care.

"This is our specialty," says Executive Director Nancy Smyth.

The nature and level of that care depends upon the stage of the resident's dementia.

"We have folks that we could consider in the early stages," Smyth says. "With a little bit of cuing and little bit of guidance, they could direct themselves fairly well."

A senior in early-stage dementia might need to be

cued, or reminded, that it's time to go to dinner, or might have to have his or her clothes laid out in the morning. Someone whose dementia is much more advanced might need a lot of help eating or dressing.

The Rochester Presbyterian Home operates in line with the principles of the Eden Alternative model of care, which places the needs and preferences of residents ahead of those of the institution. Cottage Grove and Creekside offer household settings in which seniors have their own rooms. Those rooms access common social, kitchen and dining areas.

"It's a home, so the furnishing themselves are simple," Smyth explains. "The simplified environment is really helpful for people with memory loss."

The sites even have vegetable gardens. Seniors have more control over their lives than they might in other facilities, and can more easily participate in activities or interact with others.

"They can participate in the life of the home—setting the table, working in the garden," Smyth says.

Those kinds of activities can help residents preserve their memories.

"Those things were part of their lives," Smyth says. "They're preserving those skills that they've practiced all of their lifetimes."

There are also outings to local places or events and social gatherings, some of which feature music.

"They love music, most of our folks, and that's something that they will retain," Smyth explains. "The old songs, they'll know every word."

Pets are allowed, and family members and friends are welcome to visit. As a resident's dementia progresses, he or she receives more intensive care.

Most of Jewish Senior Life's 600 residents are at least 65 years old, and 84 percent suffer from some kind of memory deficit. Music plays a formal role in helping them deal with those losses.

In 2014, Jewish Senior Life became the first Rochester-area organization to adopt the Music & Memory program. Developed by a New York City-based nonprofit, the program advocates the use of music to help those suffering memory or cognitive deficits reduce the effects of those losses, and cope with them.

"It's really about offering individualized, personalized music to residents that could benefit," says Sue Adams-Price, the nonprofit's Person-Centered Care Program Manager.

Under the Music & Memory program, Jewish Senior Life provides personal iPods and headphones to its seniors and other residents.

"We started just with residents who have memory loss, but realized that it could help many other residents," Adams-Price explains. "Anybody who could benefit from it, we offered it to them."

Each resident, either alone or with help, loads a device with his or her choices in music—the more evocative, the better.

"Think of special moments—maybe weddings, of high school—and songs come up," Adams-Price says. "It just kind of brings you back to that point in life."

Those special sounds can confer a number of benefits. After plugging into their iPods, residents have become more physically active or verbal.

"They seem happier, more social," Adams-Price asserts. "It changes their mood."

One woman whose primary language was Italian became agitated whenever she had to have her teeth cleaned. Jewish Senior Life's staff talked to her family, came up with Italian music that she had once preferred and downloaded it to her iPod. The woman put on her headphones, and the effect was obvious.

"She became a different person, and just started singing, and was just so happy, and went to the dentist and got her teeth cleaned," Adams-Price says.

Jewish Senior Life uses other technologies to stimulate residents' minds and memories, as well.

Three of the residential facilities for seniors for which Downing-Forget is medical director are part of Rochester Regional Health.

"We have established programs for residents with dementia," she says.

Residents of the Hill Haven Skilled Nursing Facility can also experience the benefits of the Music & Memory program.

"Not only do people perk up while they're listening to the music and become more engaged, but even after you take the earphones off, people tend to speak more, become more socially interactive, more socially alert," Downing-Forget explains.

The calming effects of listening to those special tunes can also make a resident's social interactions—and other elements of that person's life—easier.

"It's something that we use as an alternative to medication," Downing-Forget says.

The Edna Tina Wilson Living Center (ETW), another Rochester Regional Health facility, is designed to meet the needs of its residents, most of whom at least have moderate or end-stage dementia. Built like a wheel, ETW's units are connected to a central courtyard that has its own garden—and no access to the outside world. Residents aren't allowed through the center's outer doors, but can wander safely from unit to unit.

"People with dementia, who tend to wander, often become agitated when they can't wander," Downing-Forget explains. "Wandering ... actually calms most people down."

In the warmer months, residents can spend time in the garden on their own, and enjoy barbecues and other events in the fresh air.

Rochester Regional Health also offers memory care at its own Eden Alternative campus, the Wegman Family Cottages at Park Ridge.

Mike Costanza is a Rochester-based freelance writer.