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Persons with Dementia and Their Capacity for Helping: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This observational study explored helping behaviors (HBs) among persons with dementia (PWD) in a communal dining space of a memory care facility. HBs were observed regularly and related to assistance with another resident, staff, and stuffed animal. PWD, even in the moderate stages of the disease, have the capacity to help others.



Purpose

Research has often focused on the psychological and behavioral deficits of PWD. Of interest is the degree to which PWD can help others. Curle and Keller (2010) identified several HBs in this population. However, the purpose of this study is to identify to whom the HB is being directed.

Methodology

Observational research was conducted during lunchtime in the dining area of a local memory care unit in Southwest Michigan. Through passive participation, data was collected from 17 periods and included a daily average of 15 participants, all with moderate stage dementia. HBs were defined as a resident providing aid or benefit to another person or object. Patterns in helping behavior were determined through thematic analysis. Because of the anonymity of data collection, no defining characteristics of residents were documented.

Results

Based on thematic analysis, physical and verbal HBs were demonstrated to 1) another resident; 2) a staff member; or 3) a stuffed animal. These behaviors depended on several key factors, including with whom residents were sitting, cognitive status, dependency levels, and presence of staff. Stress in the environment tended to limit HBs.

1) **Verbal HBs** to another resident were the most common. For example:

"This cup is yours and see, this cup is mine."

"Are you okay?"

"He needs to be closer to the table."

2) **Physical HBs** directed toward staff was also evident. For example, residents would help staff stack used plates, wipe the table off, and fold napkins at the end of the meal.

3) **HBs toward an inanimate object**, a stuffed cat, was consistently demonstrated by one resident.

"Grandma loves you honey."

"This little guy needs something to eat."



Conclusion

PWD have a wide range of psychological deficits including memory impairments and the inability to engage in meaningful relationships. Recognition of the capacity of PWD for giving assistance can modify general perceptions of the disease. PWD are not only care recipients and have the potential to help others.

Limitations of this study included inability to hear potential helping conversations over environmental noise, lack of interrater reliability, and a single site for observation.

Future studies should include multiple sites, observations during different mealtimes, and HBs across different stages of the dementia.

References Available Upon Request.

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