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It's a kind of magic

An Australian provider using a new therapeutic activity from the US says it is seeing a reduction in wandering and isolation among residents with dementia. Darragh O Keeffe reports.

What goes up must come ...? It takes two to ...? Two's company but three's a ...? Combining general knowledge with reminiscence, Memory Magic is a therapeutic activity based on Montessori principles.

Developed in the US, the program aims to promote the use of cognitive abilities and motor skills, promote social interaction, reduce challenging behaviors' and wandering and build confidence through a failure-free experience.

Anglican Care is the first aged care provider in Australia to purchase and implement the program. The provider is currently rolling the activity out across its seven residential aged care facilities, consisting of 528 high and low care places, its community-based programs, consisting of 181 packages and its day therapy centre.

To evaluate the benefits of the program for residents and staff, the provider has commissioned Monash and Swinburne universities to evaluate the implementation.

While the research findings won't be available until October, anecdotally, managers and staff involved in rolling out the program tell of inspiring results.

"We've seen its benefit in reducing wandering behavior, increasing socialization among previously withdrawn residents, bolstering the involvement of staff and families in activity time, and, overall, creating a sense of fun and enjoyment," says Jane Meldrum, lifestyle programs coordinator for Anglican Care.

"The activity is failure free, which is hugely important. It doesn't set the resident up to fail. It's about asking questions that are relevant to their past. It could be a question relating to a song, which will often lead to a sing song among the group. We've had residents who don't talk, are completely withdrawn, suddenly breaking into song. It's an amazing tool."

Donna Paton concurs.

And while her facility, Warnervale Gardens Hostel, is among the last of Anglican Care's to implement the activity, Patton says the positive impact has been immediate.

“It’s taken a while to make its way across the organization. But we’re thrilled to have it now, because we’d been hearing so much about it and already we’re seeing incredible results,” says Paton, the lifestyle coordinator at Warnervale.

“The residents get a great sense of achievement when they answer questions. And it is constantly prompting conversations about their school days, their teenage years. We’re already seeing a reduction in wandering and increased communication. It’s been great for us – we have some pretty high care residents. Even residents who previously tended to sit out during activities are now taking part, yelling out answers.”

In fact, the activity can be used with residents with varying cognitive ability – from those with no dementia to those with severe dementia, says Meldrum.

However, as Daphne Fitzpatrick, a volunteer at the Jesmond Grove Hostel points out, “some residents get the activity better than others”.

“But the great thing is they actually help each other. And, of course, we work with them, helping them play the game. I work with the activity officer running a one hour session for 11 residents every Monday and Friday. We like to keep the same groups so we can monitor how residents are progressing week to week,” says Fitzpatrick.

“One resident, Dorothy, is a perfect example. She is improving every week. It’s incredible to watch it. Each time she takes part in the activity she gets better and better at it.”

Reminiscence is particularly good for residents with dementia. And the activity touches on elements from the resident’s past and prompts them to think about hobbies, experiences and interests. Often an answer will lead to a broader discussion, says Fitzpatrick.

It’s taken some effort on the part of Anglican Care staff to bring Memory Magic to life in Australia.

“A previous manager with Anglican Care had a sample pack and she left it here with me,” explains Meldrum. “She told me it wasn’t yet in use in Australia. After a while I decided to look into the activity. I did some research on it, looked at the US literature, and then approached management about running a trial in some facilities with the pack we had.

“We wanted to see if the residents responded to the activity, and they absolutely did. I remember in one of the earliest sessions, a lady who wanders a lot ended up sitting down and playing for an hour and a half; she was so engrossed. That just blew the staff away and completely confirmed the US research findings.”

The next phase for Meldrum and colleagues was to finance the purchase of the activity – at a cost of $6000 – which they did through fundraising.

With regards to implementation, key senior lifestyle staff undertook a webinar and teleconference with the program developers in the US. They also completed an online training course in delivering the activity. Next, they went about passing it to the lifestyle staff at a series of meetings.

“We also ran a session for our volunteers, so they could learn how to assist in running the activity. Family members subsequently became familiar with the activity and were also keen to get involved. For families, it enables them to get involved in the group sessions and be part of the activities,” says Meldrum.

For now, the organization awaits the findings of the Monash and Swinburne research study.

In the meantime, staff continue to witness for themselves the benefits of the unique activity.

“It’s just remarkable, the results we’re seeing,” says Meldrum. “As its name suggests, it’s magic.”