Tools for caregivers of people with dementia

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There is much to be said about the challenges of caring for someone with dementia.

Of course, there are also rewards, but too often it's exhausting and frustrating for both the person with the brain disease and their care provider. It seems like the main difficulty is how best to communicate and manage challenging behaviors.

Here are two programs you might want to be aware of, especially if you're caring for someone with this diagnosis. We have an excellent resource through the Rogue Valley Council of Governments, Senior and Disability Services. It's called the Dementia Support Programs, and you can call the Aging and Disability Resource Connection for more info at 541-618-7572.

One program is called the Teepa Snow Positive Approach and the other, the STAR-C program. These programs seek to help caregivers understand and respond to difficult behaviors that are a result of dementia, and to enable both the caregiver and care receiver to experience less stress and depression.

To learn more, I addressed these questions to Heidi Gehman, Senior and Disability Services direct services programs supervisor. Here are her answers.

1. What group of individuals are these programs designed to address?

The STAR-C and Teepa Snow Positive Approach to Care programs offer strategies for improving the functioning of persons with dementia, including addressing problem behaviors, as well as decreasing the symptoms of caregivers' related feelings of stress, burden and depression.

2. How are these programs structured?

The STAR-C program is a structured, six-month, behavior-based program with four scheduled in-home visits, concurrent and follow-up phone calls, as well as educational homework and strategies to decrease problem issues and increase pleasant interactions. The Positive Approach to Care program is a less structured in-home program for caregiver education about dementia, focusing on the interpersonal dynamics of coping with a changing brain. Content and duration of the sessions depend on each unique situation, and focus on responsive, relational skills in the caregiver to improve dynamics and behaviors.

3. Is there an initial assessment process?

There is no required assessment for these programs, just a simple screening process to determine whether the situation is appropriate for one of these programs. This partly depends on what the caregiver is looking for, how much time and commitment they can give to the program, and whether the situation is stable enough for the program to be of benefit to the caregiver and care receiver.

4. What resources do these programs offer to help keep a loved one at home?

Both programs provide education about dementia, which allows for a better understanding of the behaviors of the person with dementia, as well as strategies and skills to provide appropriate care. STAR-C is a more behavior-based approach, and Positive Approach to Care is a more relational, interpersonal approach to the skills needed to care for a person with dementia. These skills and knowledge allow the caregiver to feel more empowered and competent, reduce stress and depression in both the caregiver and care receiver, and reduce problem behaviors in the person dealing with dementia.

5. How can people apply for these programs?

Anyone who is caregiving for someone with dementia at home, with the intention of remaining in the home, is eligible for this program. They will be referred to one of the Rogue Valley Council of Governments' trained staff to be screened for the program.

Over the years, I've heard well-meaning family and friends trying to communicate with the person who has dementia in less than helpful ways. Challenging their comments, arguing or getting angry at them are some examples of this. Not that they meant to cause harm, but simply out of frustration, or not knowing more effective ways to communicate that actually work much better for them both. With these two programs now available, there will be fewer difficulties for everyone.