



Gentle Embrace Program Can Ease Dementia Symptoms

Caregivers and loved ones of those with dementia face a unique set of challenges, as they try to decipher and understand the range of behaviors, emotional challenges and other symptoms that can occur as dementia worsens.

VNA, Western Pennsylvania has launched a program that can help.

The Gentle Embrace dementia support program utilizes non-medication interventions to reduce dementia symptoms like agitation and confusion. The individualized, evidence-based interventions include the Compassionate Touch Technique, Music Memories and the use of the Cuddle Blanket in conjunction with palliative care and hospice.

“The biggest benefit of the program is the one-on-one individualized care we give the families. It is our way of helping make a connection with their loved one, when they otherwise might not be able to find a way,” said Rev. Valerie Schubert, hospice and spiritual counselor, and administrator of the program.

Rev. Schubert explained that members of the Gentle Embrace team meet initially with family members to develop a care plan.

“We all just work as a team to see what’s needed,” she said.

Compassionate Touch is a gentle massage and bathing technique using naturally calming oils and lotions which can help relax the patient. All of the aides in the program are trained to use the technique and also can teach it to family members and caretakers.



Rev. Val Schubert (left) and VNA Hospice Aide Holly Kovalick (right) present their patient Gussie Dlutowski with a new Cuddle Blanket.



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Music has also been shown to alleviate the stress that accompanies dementia. The Gentle Embrace team can work with the patient's family to develop a music playlist of specific songs that are meaningful to the patient, which can be played in times of agitation.

A therapeutic, lightly weighted blanket, called a Cuddle Blanket, is also used to give a gentle "hug" to the patient. The light weight of the blanket is proven to offer a sense of safety and calm.

"The Cuddle Blanket mimics deep sensory touch, leading to an endorphin release, which helps relax the patient," Rev. Schubert said.

"We can also offer spiritual care as part of the program," she continued. "We might just sit and read devotionals or listen to spiritual songs—whatever may have reached the patient before, we will try."

"We look for simple rewards," she said. "There's a high demand on caregivers. This program helps them disperse some of that responsibility instead of carrying it all on their own shoulders."

To learn more, please call VNA, Western Pennsylvania at (724) 282-6806.