

Western Pennsylvania Guide to Good Health

Health News You and Your Family Can Use

Senior Guide

Safe at Home: Community LIFE's Dementia Program Facilitates Living at Home

By Nancy Kennedy

"Persons with dementia and memory disorders experience many losses, changes and transitions, but they never lose the ability to receive love and caring."

That statement, spoken by Lisa H. Jenkins, MSSA, LSW, perfectly expresses the philosophy of the Dementia Care program at Community LIFE. Jenkins, who serves as the programs Behavioral Health Coordinator, works in partnership with Tina Opina, Dementia Care Coordinator, to assure that Community LIFE participants with a diagnosis of dementia can live safely in the community, in their own homes or in the home of a family member. Making that happen isn't simple or easy, but to these two professionals, it's absolutely worth the effort. They have a passion for their work and bring years of experience to their mission: to provide excellent, individualized, patient-centered care through teamwork and commitment. At Community LIFE, participants with dementia are protected, respected and cherished.

"The team approach is the key to our program," explains Tina Opina. "Lisa and I problem solve together and work closely with our staff and the families of participants. We do extensive training and education with both families and staff members, and we offer many forms of support to families. Family education is essential. I work mostly with the families, following them to make sure their loved one's needs are being met. I call them regularly and I am always available for them to call me."

Support for families includes regular support group meetings. Coping with dementia is demanding, and families may experience significant stress, Opina says. Talking with others who share the experience, and with professionals who understand, helps family members to feel less alone. Various topics are presented at the group meetings, and a monthly newsletter, including a report on the support group, is distributed to all the families. Self-care for the caregiver is a frequent topic. Every session begins and ends with poetry.

Keeping persons with dementia safe at home is especially challenging when the person has a tendency to wander – a common occurrence that is known as elopement. Elopement can be triggered by changes in routine, changes in the environment, visitors, warmer weather and even unfamiliar furniture. Community LIFE has addressed this issue with an innovative initiative called Operation



Tina Opina (right)
and Lisa Jenkins (left)

STOP – an elopement risk management program that Opina and Jenkins designed themselves. "Operation STOP helps the team identify situations which raise the risk of an elopement," Jenkins says. "Participants with dementia can be surprisingly resourceful and determined, and we have to be vigilant for potential elopement. We also help the team devise

interventions to prevent it."

Training and education for the staff members of all disciplines is ongoing. According to Jenkins, staff members must be both creative thinkers and critical thinkers. "Everyone with dementia is unique. We know the participants very well, which is helpful. It's a tough job to care for persons with dementia. Caregivers have to be able to think fast, analyze a situation quickly and make a decision about how to intervene. They have to be able to answer in the moment, and it can be urgent. You don't want the situation to escalate – how do you prevent that?"

Despite the challenges, both Tina Opina and Lisa Jenkins love their work. "It's everyone's hope to age at home, in safety and love, surrounded by familiar faces and things. This job requires you to put your heart on the line," Opina says. "You think of your own loved ones. We experience a lot of loss because we have relationships with participants and families."

"The connection we have with participants is genuine," Jenkins adds. "We see that they feel safe and loved here, they relax and smile. It's satisfying when our interventions work and we have success. People thrive here, and although there are times of sadness, we are all proud of the work that we do."

That pride was bolstered when Community LIFE's Operation STOP was presented with the Clinical Quality Improvement Award and UPMC Innovation Award from UPMC's Senior Services and Community Provider Services Fair last summer.



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