



More than just clowning around

Helping hands that enrich the lives of people with dementia

“There is no pill that can do this,” says Dr. **Pia Kontos**, referring to the findings of her study that evaluated the effect of elder-clowns on people living with dementia.

Dementia can lead to deficits in memory, language, attention, reasoning and judgement. Often, people living with this illness can become agitated, depressed and apathetic. Given that medications can alleviate only some of these symptoms and can have harmful side effects, researchers are investigating alternative approaches. A recent innovation in arts-based approaches to dementia care is the introduction of elder-clowns into nursing

homes. Elder-clowns are professional performers who specialize in the art of clowning with individuals living with dementia. In addition to completing formal studies in acting and the clowning arts, elder-clowns receive training on how to interact with older adults living with dementia. Unlike their circus counterparts, they wear minimal make-up and colourful dress from the 1950s.

Elder-clowns are brought into nursing homes to enrich the lives of older adults with dementia by lessening social isolation, and providing opportunities to express creativity, playfulness and imagination. Their interactions with residents can include verbal, physical



and musical jests that incorporate humour, storytelling and empathy. Importantly, elder-clowns tailor their interaction to the life histories of each person and to the person's mood and responsiveness during each visit.

While the art of clowning was adapted for the dementia population in the 1990s, there is limited knowledge of its impact. To explore this issue, Dr. Kontos led a study in which four elder-clowns visited 23 nursing home residents living with moderate to severe dementia.

Dr. Kontos and her colleagues found significant reductions in agitation and increased quality of life in residents after 12 weeks of biweekly elder-clown visits. They also observed that residents would respond to the elder-clowns and engage with them by being deliberately funny, playful and imaginative. The residents also expressed sadness, which is typically suppressed in conventional dementia care,

but was instead validated and supported by the clowns.

The findings of the study were two-fold: it revealed that elder-clowning provides therapeutic benefits and dispelled the myth that people living with dementia are incapable of meaningful interactions. By showing that elder-clowning can provide real benefits, these findings will inform new care approaches that aim to improve quality of life and enrich the lives of people living with dementia.

Image: (R-L) Dr. Kontos, and elder-clowns Kathleen Le Roux and Phil Koole. When visiting nursing home residents, elder-clowns bring along ukuleles and other props to support their interactions.

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