

Case study

The Dancing Way

The agitation which is often expressed by people with dementia can be stressful and debilitating for both the individual and the carers. A small trial of an alternative form of dance therapy by Alzheimer's Australia WA has produced encouraging results, writes **Keryn Curtis**.

Attempts to minimise the use of medication to deal with agitation and other 'challenging behaviours' in caring for people with dementia, have led to a body of research supporting the use of various alternative and psychosocial approaches such as reminiscence, music therapy and aromatherapy.

"We try to use psychosocial interventions and avoid the use of medication. We have our own dementia consultant, but we also like to consult DBMAS (Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service, offered by Alzheimer's Australia WA) for help, especially when we are having difficulties," says Angela Lowe, Care Manager at Brightwater Care's Edgewater and Joondalup homes in the northern suburbs of Perth.

"We had a situation at Joondalup where there were some problems with relationships between residents in one of our small low care cluster homes and it was creating difficulties for both the residents and the staff. We were looking for a holistic approach and at DBMAS they get you to think in a big way about the bigger picture and families and resources you can use."

Debbie Duignan, a Senior Behaviour Consultant with DBMAS, worked with Angela and her staff, in consultation with Brightwater's own dementia consultant, Virginia Moore, to address their challenges.

"There were some problems with interpersonal dynamics. There were differing levels of ability among residents that was causing communication issues and it was pretty tricky for staff. But we didn't want to start moving people, because they were settled. We just wanted to manage the situation better and help the group to bond a bit more," says Duignan.

"One of the people in the education service heard about a fairly new therapeutic dance called Wu Tao which combines tai chi elements with dance movements to promote calm and wellbeing and we thought it sounded interesting."

SOMETHING NEW

Developed by former ballerina Michelle Locke, Wu Tao, 'The dancing way' is a series of five dances which aim to balance the body's life force, or 'chi', by stretching the 'meridians', which oriental medicine believes channels energy through the body. Each of the dances represents one of the elements – air, water, wood, fire and earth.

"After meeting Michelle, we decided to trial it with this group of residents," says Duignan. "We felt it might help to bring some harmony into the peoples' lives. Also, Michelle had a number of instructors and one of them had adapted the movements around the mobility issues of older people."

In February 2009, the trial began with six residents, chosen

Australian Ageing Agenda's Dementia Supplement is compiled by Richard Fleming, Director of HammondCare's Dementia Services Development Centre (DSDC). Mr Fleming says this case study is an encouraging introduction to Wu Tao and now more rigorous evaluation should be carried out.



Debbie Duignan (centre) with Brightwater Joondalup staff and residents.

because of their levels of assessed agitation. The Wu Tao instructor visited Joondalup once a week to teach an adapted version of the dances for the group, which included the residents, their carers and some family members. Therapy assistants and the facility's occupational therapist also joined the sessions to assess suitability from a physical point of view.

Care Manager, Angela Lowe, says they were extremely pleased with the results of the trial.

"The sense of wellbeing I saw on residents' faces was phenomenal. Over four weeks you could really see the impact. There was a definite decrease in levels of agitation as we measured it but just generally, everyone – residents and staff alike – came away from the sessions happy and relaxed and they would be talking about it and looking forward to the next session," says Lowe.

"It really allows for people with dementia to have some self expression and it wasn't difficult. One lady who was very cognitively impaired said in the evaluation, 'just let it all come out' which was lovely."

STAFF PARTICIPATION

"Staff involvement was an important factor in the trial's success," says Duignan. "When we evaluated it, that was a real highlight for the residents. One resident commented that it was 'teaching the staff to be like them'. It was seeing the staff stepping out of their usual roles and doing something together with the residents, as equals - it really helped create a bond."

Lowe agrees. "You have to free up time for staff. By incorporating extra staff and backfilling a bit, you can give most staff the opportunity to participate."

"It was really obvious to us how stimulating the activity was and there really were some great improvements, even over such a short period of time. We are meeting with other Brightwater care managers to introduce the concept to them now and we have applied for grants to continue it," says Lowe. ■

For further information about this trial, contact Debbie Duignan: Debbie.Duignan@alzheimers.asn.au For information about Wu Tao, see www.wutaodance.com