NCTRC FUNDED RESEARCH PROJECT

The effects of participation in a Memory Café on caregivers' perceptions of community belonging

Statement of the Problem

Caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD) face significant risks of social isolation and diminished community belonging. As highlighted in the Surgeon General’s 2023 Advisory on the “Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation,” social isolation increases risk of premature death, dementia, heart disease, and mental health challenges—particularly for older adults and caregivers. Despite growing recognition of Memory Cafés as a community-based intervention, no research had previously examined whether participation in a Memory Café improves caregivers’ perceptions of community belonging.

Purpose of the Research

This study, led by two CTRS faculty members at Southern Connecticut State University in collaboration with a CTRS/Certified Dementia Practitioner working in a secured memory care unit, aimed to evaluate the effects of Memory Café participation on family caregivers’ sense of community belonging. The Café was designed following best practice guidelines and was held bi-monthly at the RT Clinic at SCSU. Sessions were facilitated by two CTRSs with the support of four recreational therapy students and included structured social activities, interest-based programming, and dedicated caregiver peer time.

Summary of Results

Recruitment yielded a modest sample: two couples who attended regularly, a total of six couples over the course of the program, and one caregiver who attended independently—her family member with dementia lived out of state and she was caregiving on weekends. Notably, the anticipated need for a separate caregiver-only group did not materialize; caregivers expressed genuine enjoyment in participating in meaningful activities alongside their loved ones. Only two participants completed the modified version of the Belongingness Scale, which was insufficient for quantitative analysis. However, unsolicited qualitative responses provided meaningful insight.

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One family caregiver shared: “This group has offered an opportunity to get out of the house and feel connected to a community. It’s the only thing I really have to engage in outside of being a caregiver.” Another caregiver wrote, “’ I’m not sure what your expectations were when setting up the Memory Cafe, but it’s clear from yesterday’s discussion there’s a clear benefit to caregivers as well as those with a dementia diagnosis.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

While the full quantitative scope of the study was limited by low survey completion rates, the qualitative findings suggest that Memory Café participation holds genuine promise as a tool for reducing caregiver isolation and fostering community belonging. The emergent theme of connection and meaningful engagement warrants further investigation. Future research should prioritize improved recruitment strategies, streamlined survey administration, and expanded outreach to community partners such as the Alzheimer’s Association and local Councils on Aging. The finding that caregivers preferred to participate alongside their loved ones—rather than in a separate group—is itself a meaningful clinical insight that should inform future Memory Café design and caregiver program planning.

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