

Memory Cafés NS

Best Practices for Working with Older Adults with Cognitive Impairment at a Memory Café

Memory Cafés are fun, relaxed and even joyful social events. Groups can be all sizes, but café-based Memory Cafés tend to be 20 guests or less given the space limitations and for the group to get to know one another, usually over a several month period. To help ensure a positive experience, there are a few special “best practices” to observe when running a Memory Café:

1. Volunteers helping to “host” the café should have some educational exposure to memory disorders, including dementia. Dementias are a collection of often very different neurocognitive conditions which can affect behavior and mood as well as memory. For example, some participants at the café may have a traumatic brain injury, (TBI), others may have Alzheimers Disease, Frontotemporal Dementia, Parkinsons Disease or Mild Cognitive Impairment which may affect memory, mood and behavior in the café. Generally these symptoms are manageable with gentle support, acceptance or if necessary redirection. Since caregivers or family members are present, there should always be someone familiar there for all participants with cognitive impairment. The Memory Café is a social experience for family members and caregivers as well as those with cognitive challenges so not a “drop off”. All participants are equal members in the group. No one is asked for a diagnosis and volunteers may not even know who has memory impairment and who is a family member or caregiver.
2. All participants including hosts should wear name tags for each event. This ensures that all participants feel reassured they do not need to remember anyone’s name. At times of sharing, everyone is allowed to pass; silence is always ok as are upset feelings.
3. Volunteers are likely to become aware of personal health information about participants during Memory Café events since talking and sharing is important to the social experience. Volunteers observe nondisclosure, so that they do not talk about the personal health issues of guests and respect their privacy. Names of participants are not discussed in public outside the group to protect privacy of health information that volunteers may become privy to. Exception: facilitators may need to discuss what happens during the group with a Memory Café professional health advisor or outside agency in the event that imminent danger, abuse or neglect are suspected.
4. Regarding photographs, it is important that while we want to celebrate the Memory Cafés, some participants may not wish to be photographed. Also some guests may lack capacity to give consent, even if they have signed a form. So it is best to take advertising photos of the café event itself, the hosts, visiting artists and only participants who are clearly interested in being photographed and capable of giving consent. It is important to be clear what photos will be used for.

5. Blank index cards with pens can be left on café tables during the event to encourage participants to make suggestions for activities and where possible some of these suggestions could be incorporated in future sessions. Generally all café activities should be something that enhances whole group experience rather than separate the group or be "too difficult" for some to participate in.
6. Memory Café attendees will benefit from a reminder call usually a few days before the next event. This ensures optimal attendance and gives the co-ordinators a chance to call someone on the waiting list to come to a café on a given day if someone is unable to attend. Email may be less effective than a direct reminder phone call to connect with individuals who will attend a Memory Café.

Any questions specific to your café? Contact Beverley.Cassidy@nshealth.ca at Seniors Mental Health, Department of Psychiatry Dalhousie University Halifax NS