

East-ender: Handling dementia

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Chances are you know, or know of, someone with some modicum of dementia. Yet, it is not a well understood phenomenon and reaction toward a stricken loved one might tend more toward agitation than understanding.

Dementia is an umbrella term for a group of symptoms caused by disorders that affect the brain. It is not a specific disease. Many different diseases, like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and stroke, can cause it. Drugs can deal with the symptoms and slow down the progression; but there is no cure.

Fortunately there are opportunities in our area to learn about dementia and how to deal with those who have it.

Comfort Keepers, an in-home care service provider, offers seminars on handling difficult behaviors and understanding dementia.

Terry Guberman, the owner of Comfort Keepers, said, "When we first opened nine years ago there was very little training dealing with dementia out there."

Then she discovered a video made by the Alzheimer Association of North Carolina. "It is about dementia and the behaviors and how to handle them," Guberman said. "We used it primarily for our staff for about a year until I realized that clients also needed this training. Many didn't know what to do with grandma once she started to act out and exhibit behaviors like wandering and not bathing and outbursts of anger."

Guberman then started to put on two part seminars built around the video and a panel of health care experts. They've done about seven.

One group that took advantage of the opportunity was the Support Network at Penn National (SNaP). SNaP, lead by Executive Director Donna Crissman, is a program dedicated to the concept of "aging in place". About 40 people attended their two day program. The panel of professionals for the SNaP sponsored seminar consisted of Audrey Pierce, Assistant Administrator at Providence Place, Sandy Buffington, Community Education Representative and Amanda Freeze, Medical Social Worker from Odyssey Health Care, and Rev. Terri Zastovnick a Social Worker and Chaplain with Home Nursing Agency.

Participants Norm and Jean Harper, who have had more experience with dementia than most since Jean's sister had it as did Norm's Uncle, still felt as though they got something they could use.

Norm said, "The thing I was most impressed with was the concept of getting in the other person's space. Since people with dementia tend not to have short term memory but can go back 10 or 15 years with a great deal of clarity you should deal with them in whatever time period they happen to be in."

SNaP offered the people of Penn National a valuable learning experience. And Comfort Keepers has three seminars planned for the fall at Franklin County Libraries that others could profit from. You can get information about them at 352-2133.