

Promising Nonpharmacologic Interventions to Manage Behavioral symptoms: The Role of Occupational Therapy in Dementia Care

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Occupational therapists have an important role in helping family caregivers and improving the quality of life of individuals with dementia. This paper presents results from two randomized trials to demonstrate two different nonpharmacologic occupational therapy-based interventions for managing behavioral symptoms in individuals with dementia living at home with family caregivers. Behavioral symptoms are common in dementia, occurring across disease trajectory and disease type. Behavioral symptoms are associated with poor life quality in dementia patients, higher levels of distress in family caregivers and greater health-related costs. Pharmacologic approaches are not always effective, may cause harm, and do not address some of the most troublesome behaviors to families. The Tailored Activity Program, an 8 home session occupational therapy tailored activity program, resulted in reduced frequency of behaviors and improved engagement in activities as well as enhanced caregiver skills and reduced time in caregiving. The ACT Program, a biopsychosocial environmental approach, involved 12 home sessions by occupational therapists to identify and modify behavioral and environmental triggers of behaviors caregivers targeted. Additionally, a nurse visit provided caregiver education in common medical problems (dehydration, pain), and obtained blood/urine samples from dementia patients to identify incipient medical conditions that may be contributing to behaviors. Outcomes included identification of incipient medical conditions in 33% of patients, reduced caregiver burden and upset, and reduction in the primary targeted behavioral outcome. Taken together, these studies suggest that nonpharmacologic approaches involving occupational therapists providing tailored activity, environmental and task simplification strategies can manage behavioral symptoms. Methodological challenges and translating these proven programs into real world clinical settings will be discussed.