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Family-Supervised Exercise Programs for Persons with Dementia

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Introduction: In reframing the experience and understanding of dementia to focus on capacities rather than losses and underscore the interactive qualities of identity and self, the "personhood movement" (Leibing & Cohen 2006) redefined basic goals of dementia care. Custodial care no longer suffices. The emerging gold standard for quality dementia care entails preservation of personhood through engagement in meaningful occupations. Family-supervised exercise programs provide potentially meaningful occupations both for persons with dementia (PWD) and their family members.

Objectives: The poster describes the development and assessment of family-supervised exercise programs for PWDs and describes the opinions and "lived experience" of program participants.

Methods: An interdisciplinary team including an occupational therapist and medical anthropologist developed individualized exercise programs for 30 PWDs and their primary family member, based on the interests and needs of both. Family members were trained to supervise the program and exercised with their relative three times a week for three months. Occasional telephone supervision and a mid-term in-home visit from the therapist allowed cost-efficient monitoring. Follow up interviews and focus groups elicited family exercise supervisors' perceptions of the program, reactions of their relative to the program, barriers to participation, and recommendations for improvement.

Results: Most exercise pairs completed the program and demonstrated significant improvement in physical function. No injuries occurred. Although programs were designed to meet individual needs and preferences, some family exercise supervisors modified the exercises. Participants reported that the program provided additional structure to their day and meaningful activity to share both with each other and with other family members (e.g., grandchildren). **Conclusion:** With initial training and minimal monitoring, lay individuals safely and effectively supervised home-based exercise programs for their relatives with dementia. These programs promoted physical functioning and engagement in meaningful occupations. **Contributions to practice:** Therapists can extend the quality and level of care to PWDs by developing home-based exercise programs and partnering with family members to sustain them. Family-supervised exercise programs can provide safe, effective, and meaningful occupations for PWDs and their family members.

Leibing, A. & Cohen, L. (Eds.) 2006. Thinking about dementia. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.