

An unconventional method: learning dementia caregiving from improv comedy

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What do Improv comedy and dementia caregiving have in common? Quite a lot actually. Improv comedy (short for improvisation comedy) focuses on spontaneous collaboration between different performers, often to produce an unscripted sketch or show. Similarly, dementia caregiving is often described in having to 'live in the moment' of the person living with dementia. The 'actors', or caregivers, have to collaborate with the person they care for, often focusing not on fact or reason, but an altered view of reality. Recently, I took a class that focused on applying the principles of Improv comedy to dementia caregiving. I was amazed at how much *fun* I had...which is not typically a word I would use to describe dementia caregiving. Often, when I am training and counseling family caregivers, we practice different communication and caregiving strategies such as 'living in the moment' or 'focusing on emotions, not facts'. What I found is that Improv comedy has very similar instruction that can be applied directly to dementia caregiving. In particular, I've found that two tenets of Improv are particularly helpful. The first is 'yes, and...'. This means that whatever the person says, you take as a 'gift' and respond yes, rather than criticizing and saying no. For example, a person with dementia might not always respond appropriately or accurately within a conversation. Imagine as a caregiver, you are trying to help your loved one get ready to visit family. You've spent the whole morning preparing, starting with a shower, eating breakfast, etc. You've told the person you're caring for over and over what the day's schedule looks like, but they are having trouble remembering. Watch the "yes, and" strategy at work. Person living with dementia: "I'm not really happy with you. You aren't telling me anything!" Caregiver: "Yes, and I'm so sorry. You're right. I should have told you the plan before." While this conversation doesn't necessarily reflect reality, using the "yes, and" philosophy helps the person living with dementia feel heard. The second tenet of Improv is a little more basic, telling caregivers simply to 'always make the other

look good'. When someone is acting out on stage with a partner, it's important for them to collaborate and work off of whatever the other person gives them. Let's try applying this to dementia caregiving. Caregiver: "What a beautiful day for a barbecue. Let's get some hamburgers, and throw them on the grill." Person living with dementia: "We can't go anywhere. I have to wait for my parents to come home." Using these two main rules of improv, the caregiver would acknowledge what the person says and reply, "Yes, your parents already called me and said they were running late. Let's make some extra hamburgers for them so they will be able to eat when they arrive." Dementia caregivers, does this situation sound familiar? This can be a common issue in caregiving as the person you're caring for might not be in the right time frame, might have delusions/hallucinations, or might not understand who they are/who you are. This requires an enormous amount of patience and 'living in the moment'. I've found that by using these Improv rules, it helps simplify a response for these common situations. We never want the person we are caring for to feel bad or highlight their impairment, but it can be challenging to not want to orient them to the present. Improv makes the typical dementia caregiving training a little lighter and more fun to see ways to apply these strategies to everyday life. Interested in learning more? Search the internet for a great TEDMED video by Karen Stobbe & Mondy Carter, two Improv comedians turned dementia caregivers. While caring for Karen's father, they found the uncanny parallel between dementia caregiving and Improv, and decided to apply it to their own situation. While Improv might feel a little intimidating (I have to admit I was a little nervous before I began!), it is truly an amazing way of approaching dementia caregiving challenges and enjoying what each day brings.

For more information about Memory Moment & Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness, check out their website at www.effinghamalz.org. If you are a caregiver and have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.