

## Executive Summary

The *Creating Conversations: A Dementia Activity Toolkit to Reduce Social Isolation* project had two key elements: (1) to revise ('Canadianize') an activity toolkit for persons with dementia (PwD) and pilot it by implementing it with elders with dementia at different elder care institutions; and (2) evaluate the efficacy of the toolkit using data gathered during the pilot implementation.

The Canadianizing of the toolkit, as well as its implementation (piloting), was done in partnership with nine seniors care institutions which provide Supportive Living (SL), Long Term Care (LTC) and Day Support (DS) facilities in Greater Edmonton and Calgary regions. The DTK project had two main groups of participants, PwD and care workers/staff at the elder care institutions who care for the residents.

Data for evaluating the toolkit was collected from both these groups. The evaluation was participatory in design and included the facility management, care givers (staff and family members), and PwD. The design combined three main lines of evidence: survey (with PwD participants), observations (of toolkit implementation sessions), and focus groups (with toolkit facilitators, i.e., caregivers/facility staff).

## Objectives/Implementation

The key planned outcomes of the project were:

- Reduction of social isolation for PwD and enhancement of care
- Provide PwD with creative, participatory opportunities for social engagement in a variety of environments
- Enhancement of communication and engagement between the caregiver and PwD
- Tools and activities for care givers that allow them to engage more creatively and meaningfully with PwD
- Utilize gardening-based activities for creating a fun and multi-sensory experience with physical, cognitive, emotional, and social elements for PwD
- Increased conversation and interaction between PwD at the facilities
- Enhancement of communication and engagement between family members and PwD.

The project provides caregivers (staff in elder care institutions, family members, volunteers) with a toolkit that enables them to engage in creative activities with the PwD, which results in increased social interaction in care settings. The project is designed to help better meet the social, emotional, physical, and health needs of PwD, as well as to assist caregivers in providing person-centered care. Many times, caregivers are unsure how to connect with PwD and are uncertain how to begin a conversation. This toolkit aids caregivers by giving them fun and interesting conversation starters and activities that can be used during facilitated sessions and extended into everyday activities.

### Process/ approach:

The original dementia activity toolkit was developed by Artlink Central (Scotland), and evaluated by the University of Stirling (Scotland, UK). The evaluation in Scotland found that the toolkit was beneficial in its capacity to engage groups of individuals with varying skills, capacities and communicative abilities. The toolkit's original development was based on person centered care premises to enhance social

engagement, personal fulfilment, enjoyment and wellbeing. Testing of the toolkit in Long Term Care and Day Support settings in Scotland established that creative sessions facilitated by staff and volunteers provide positive outcomes for people with dementia and those caring for them. The toolkit activates reminiscence, which supports participants to move more deeply into the creative activities by using memories of the past as a vehicle for communication and social interaction in the present. Also, participants actively shape the sessions by guiding the direction of activities. This method enables PwD to express themselves individually and collectively.

In 2021, ICCER, NorQuest College and partnering institutions initiated 'Canadianizing' the toolkit, which is the process of adapting the content and design of the toolkit to the social and cultural specificities of Canada and Canadian culture, by changing words and images, and including Canadian resources. The objective is to make the toolkit more contextualized to the seniors and the seniors care institutions of Canada. After the final version was approved by all partners and stakeholders, the physical (printed) version of the toolkit was produced. The toolkit includes a table cover; set of discussion cards (includes images and conversation starter topics); colouring pages; a guidebook; and other resource materials (both online and printed).

Implementation of the DTK included staff orientation to toolkit contents and its use through learning modules developed in partnership with the creators of the DTK (ArtLink Central, Scotland). Toolkits and orientation material were provided to participating institutions during the spring of 2022 with project team facilitation supports across implementation staff teams.

## Impact

After amalgamating and analyzing the data from all three sources, the DTK had a noteworthy impact on significantly reducing negative emotions. Although worries about social relationships and feelings of loneliness improved, the improvement was not statistically significant. The survey also revealed that positive emotions, and overall quality of life ratings did not significantly change. There were difference in improvement between sites.

The DTK provided considerable scope for creative and participatory engagement for PwD elders. Activities centering on the tablecloth produced the most curiosity and reactions in all facilities. The tablecloth facilitated opening conversations and consequently made the activities increasingly participatory. Compared to other collective activities at the facilities, the DTK produced most interactions between PwD. Most care workers face challenges vis-à-vis spontaneous communication in a group; however, the DTK program provided a constant stream of topics and themes that prompted conversations, and activities that stimulated discussions.

The DTK also enhanced communication and engagement between the care staff and the PwD given that during these sessions the PwD initiated talks and showed awareness. The DTK provided adequate tools to care staff that enabled more creative and meaningful engagements. Moreover, the toolkit provided adequate flexibility for caregivers to introduce changes in the content and instructions, to produce variations of the activities, and operate the program all year round.

The DTK lessened social isolation of PwD within the facilities. DTK sessions created meaning and joy for the PwD, and even if momentary, this engagement is vital for PwD. The DTK proved to be particularly effective for PwD who are more non-communicative, face cognitive or mobility challenges, are less functioning, or display isolation behaviors and actions. The DTK offered a range of activities and interactions that brought PwD out of their seclusion and apprehensions. The DTK supplied plentiful activities, both indoor and outdoor, which the care workers could implement without creating any monotony among PwD or for themselves.

The impact of DTK for most participants was observed during the session and less so on a continual basis. The key reason for this is the cognitive decline of many participants, especially those with moderate levels of dementia. According to the care givers, most PwD do not cognitively retain experiences of each day due to memory related difficulties; as a result, it is difficult to measure longitudinal changes in the feelings of loneliness among PwD or perceptions regarding overall quality of life, or correlate such changes to the effect of the DTK. Nonetheless, observations of sessions amply demonstrated that the DTK sessions were pleasurable and profound moments for the PwD, as evidenced by their continued engagement and involvement, and no inclination towards quitting the sessions or stopping participation.