

Chapter 17

Non-pharmacological Treatments for People with Dementia

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Worldwide, as a consequence of increased longevity, dementia prevalence is growing dramatically and Alzheimer's disease is considered the epidemic of the twenty-first century. Approved drugs for dementia exhibit moderate efficacy and offer temporary improvement to patients. Caregivers and medical professionals have been searching for more effective interventions.

Considering the difficulty in developing disease-modifying drugs for Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, it might be time to think over the possibility of holistic approaches. The complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) for dementia includes off-label use of drugs, Chinese herbal medicine, food supplements, physical exercise, leisure activities, lifestyle, and non-pharmacological cognitive interventions.

The plasticity of the human brain is the main reason that explains the growing interest in non-pharmacological treatments for dementia. They are important because they maximize the positive outcome of pharmacotherapy, have no side effects, and are easily adjusted to individual and family needs.

In my presentation I will discuss the positive results of published randomized controlled studies of non-pharmacological interventions that have targeted the symptoms of dementia (cognitive stimulation therapy, cognitive training, cognitive rehabilitation, reminiscence therapy, physical activity, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, interventions for families and caregivers). Other approaches like snoezelen/multisensory stimulation, reality orientation, bright light therapy, validation therapy, music therapy, aromatherapy, and animal-assisted therapy will also be briefly reported.

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Finally, I will present the results of a study conducted in our day care center for people with dementia in Athens. It is a multicomponent therapy consisting of various sessions such as cognitive enhancement, music, physical exercise, and computerized reminiscence. As expected, those who seem to benefit more from these therapies are people with mild cognitive impairment or people in the mild stage of dementia. Social and interpersonal skills are also improved and participants seem to be taking more initiative. Their mood has also been positively affected.

Given the encouraging outcome of these therapies, we believe more day care centers for people with dementia should be established so that more could benefit!