

The Memory Ensemble: Using Improvisation to Improve Quality of Life for Persons Living with Dementia

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Outline

- Introduction & Background
- History/mission/program
- Program design
- Session format
- Support/improvisation principles
- Examples of activities
- Facilitation lessons learned
- Research findings
- Suggestions for further reading

Introduction

- More than 5 million people are living with Alzheimer's in the United States. By 2050 this number could rise as high as 16 million (Alzheimer's Association, 2018)
- Newly diagnosed individuals told to “stay active”
 - Limited activities designed specifically for persons in the early stage
 - Anticipate a greater need for intellectually engaging programs as incidence increases
 - Non-medical interventions can provide people with a sense of meaning, purpose, confidence, efficacy and potentially decrease depression (Burgener, 2008, Livingston et al., 2017)

Art, Improvisation and Dementia

- Involvement in arts programs has been shown to have a positive effect on physical health, mental health, and social functioning in older adults, regardless of their cognitive ability.
- Older adults with dementia experience a better quality of life when they participate in the creative arts.

National Endowment for the Arts, 2012

The Memory Ensemble

Partnership of Northwestern University and Lookingglass Theatre Company

A non-medical intervention that uses improvisational performance activities to improve quality of life for persons with early stage Alzheimer's Disease and related cognitive impairment

Goals:

- 1) to improve the quality of life for persons living with Alzheimer's Disease and their families
- 2) to investigate the benefits of this non-pharmacological intervention
- 3) to translate these benefits to other communities

Research Design

Research Question

What impact does a performance based improvisational intervention have on the quality of life of individuals in the early to moderate stages of Alzheimer's disease or related dementia?

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Staff

- Teaching Artists, Social Worker, Note Taker, Volunteers, Teaching Artist in Training

Quantitative Measure

- Smiley Face Scale (Yang, 2004)

Qualitative Methods

- Field Notes – coded for themes
- Post Session Focus Groups for participants & families – coded for themes

Program Description

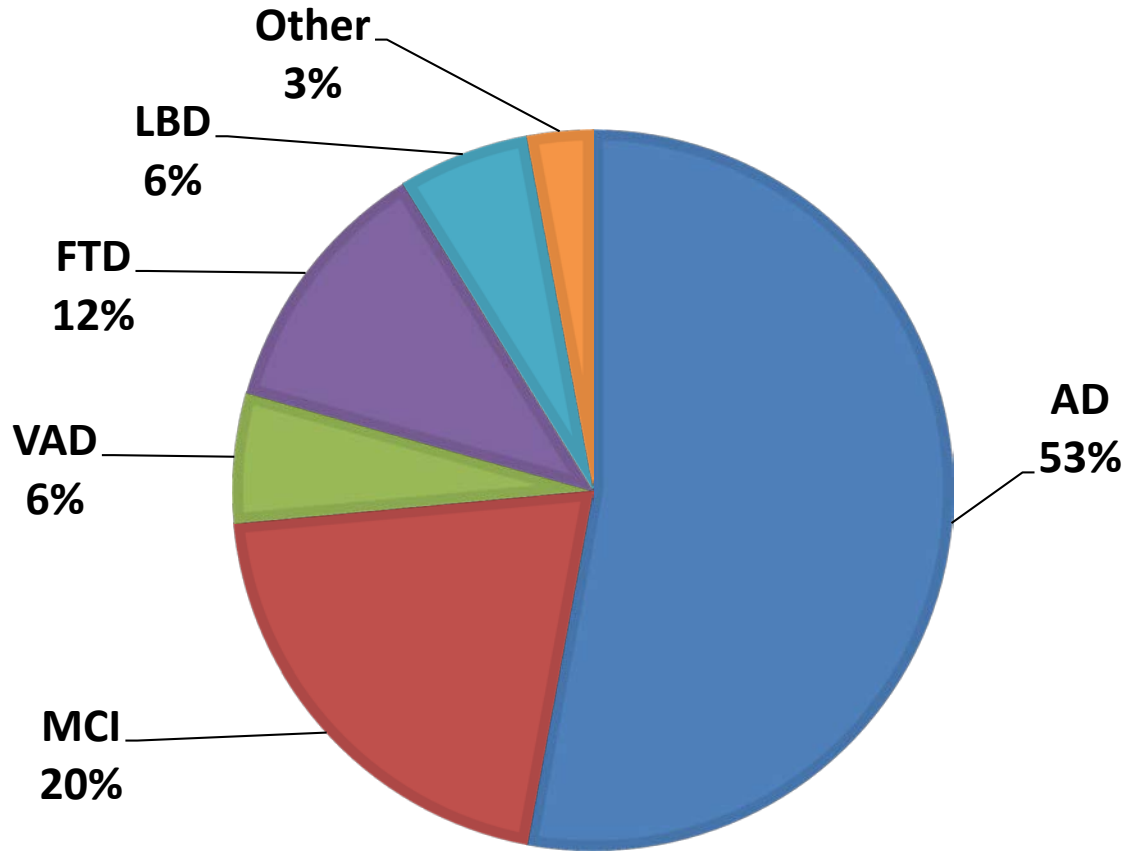
- 90-minute sessions (7 to 9)
- 6 – 14 participants
- 2+ facilitators – teaching artist/social worker
- Consistent elements
 - Room
 - Welcome sign
 - Chairs in circle
 - Smiley face sheets
 - Name tags
 - People
 - Session format

Participant Demographics

- N = 69 (over 15 six – nine week sessions)
- Mean Age – 72
- MMSE Score Average – 23
- Male – 58%, Female – 42%
- Race - 90% White, 5% African American, 5% Other
- Participants are referred from the Northwestern Alzheimer's Disease Center Research Core and Neurobehavior and Memory Clinic

Diagnoses

■ AD ■ MCI ■ VAD ■ FTD ■ LBD ■ Other



Why improvisation?

The practice of making, inventing, or arranging out of what is conveniently at hand

- “In the moment”
- Unscripted
 - No memorization
 - No right or wrong
 - No experience necessary
- Uses/builds skills & abilities that are maintained despite memory loss
 - Observation
 - Listening
 - Focus & concentration
 - Spontaneous response
 - Imagination
 - Trust & risk-taking
- Relies on relationship
- Allows for safe, challenging, supportive environment

Support/ Improv Principles

Person-centered care principles

- Treating people with dignity/respect
- Supporting personal perspectives, values, beliefs, preferences
- Listening and working in partnership

Improv principles

- Say “yes” to whatever is proposed
- Say “and,” or add on to, whatever is proposed
- Make statements (rather than ask questions)
- Accept “mistakes” as opportunities

Memory Ensemble improv principle (add ons)

- Work with what is in the room
- Lean away from exaggeration or hyperbole
- Tell people they do not have to be funny, smart, or clever
- Work with what is not in the room

Session Format

Check-in – structured metaphor-based activity - participants narrate emotional state at beginning and end of each session

Warm-up 1 – physical, vocal and social activity involves breath, gentle stretching, imagination

Warm-up 2 – physical, vocal & social activity that involves observation, listening, focus

Skill-building – improvisational exercise that introduces/reinforces concepts like “yes...and,” activity, location, character

Integrated skills – involves integration & application of multiple objectives/skills

Motto and discussion – state motto & process purpose/value of session activities

Check-out – repeat of check-in activity

Example Activity

Check-in/Check-out

Structured metaphor-based activity – participants narrate emotional state at beginning and end of each session

If my feelings were a color I would be feeling _____
_____, because _____.

Example Activity

Warm-up 1 & 2

Warm-up 1: physical, vocal and social activity involves breath, gentle stretching, & imagination

- “tin man” stretch
- going on a picnic

Warm-up 2: physical, vocal & social activity that involves observation, listening, focus

- mirror (whole group, pair, abstract – literal)
- pass the clap

Example Activity

Skill-building

Improvisational exercise that introduces/reinforces concepts like “yes...and,” activity, location, character

- Yes, it is!
- Charades (activity)
- Add-on environments (location)
- Party quirks (character)
- Bus stop simple (integrated skills)

Yes, it is!

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Example Activity

Discussion Prompts/Motto

Prompt after exercises – What did you notice? What did you experience?

Prompt at end of each session – What are your thoughts or feelings about the work we did today? Did our work today matter to you? Why? How does what we did today relate to your life?

Motto – I am a creative person. When I feel anxious or uncertain I can stop, breath, observe, and use my imagination.

Metaphor check in/out

Check in	Check Out
<p><i>Dark Gray. I'm scared to death that my memory is getting worse. My dementia is getting worse. My wife thinks I may have Alzheimer's . I'm scared I may be in assisted living before long and it would be the end of me. I have a lot going on. I'm very scared</i></p>	<p><i>Bright Green. Peaceful at the moment, not at all in trouble.</i></p>
<p><i>I feel sort of clear and empty today, but I'm not depressed. I just feel empty.... The color would be violet..</i></p>	<p><i>I feel bright orange. I feel excited and I'm trying to hold it in, but I feel better now than when I came in.</i></p>
<p>I feel green, like I'm growing, like grass. I feel alive. I'm calm, but I feel a lot better that I'm here now, so I feel alive now.</p>	<p>I feel bright yellow. I feel like I've exercised....sort of refreshed and tired at the same time.</p>
<p><i>I'm struggling. I feel something neutral, like white.</i></p>	<p><i>Bright yellow. This session in particular, about self esteem, I think was helpful.</i></p>
<p>I don't know if there is such a color as neutral. I'm anxious to be able to do things that I used to be able to do in the way of comprehending and just being joyous over certain activities...."</p>	<p>I feel like some progress has been made in this group in that we are doing things that really make you think. I think I raised my color from neutral to soft pink.</p>
<p><i>Light purple/violet- it's a pretty color. I don't usually think of purple, but it's new - kind of a "here we are again" feeling and it's good to be here.</i></p>	<p><i>I'm a rich purple- full of mystery and enjoyment, which is what we have in these sessions.</i></p>
<p>Blue – not cheerful red or yellow, not dismal black or gray. I'm in between.</p>	<p>Pink- I feel good, warm, I accept who I am, what I'm doing. Sort of warm and fuzzy.</p>
<p>I've been all colors this morning. I was a rushed color, but it's not red- rust. I went outside and was in the rain so I was a steely gray. I couldn't find anyone. I went past tulips- the most beautiful tulips I have ever seen, so now I'm those colors.</p>	<p>Bright, happy, red, exploding fireworks because I want to go on with the improvisation.</p>

Results: Themes

- 1. Initial Uncertainty-** Expression or demonstration of anxiety, worry, concern or discomfort
- 2. Increased Mood / Confidence** - A positive change in member's confidence, comfort level, mood and willingness to engage.
- 3. Connection and Community-** Demonstrates or discusses a sense of connection to others in the group
- 4. Cultivating Success** – Facilitator's encouragement, guidance, and flexibility that contributes to member's mastery of improv concepts, self confidence, or a sense of ability to succeed.

Initial Uncertainty

- *“Well I think I’m more concrete than I’d like to think, so performing I thought, “Am I going to do it wrong or not? Am I going to come up with something as creative as this person or that person?”*

Increased Mood/Confidence

A positive change in member's comfort level, confidence, mood, willingness to engage

- *“Being free to move and not feel self conscious as I normally am- That was sort of exhilarating”*
- *“I was watching others to see if there was something I could do and finally, I decided I could be on the bus”*
- *“I feel stronger”*
- *“this is developing a different side of myself“*
- *“It improved my self-confidence”*
- *“It helped me share with more people more what is going on in my life – the freedom to do it here is helpful to me even though it’s not curing anything”*
- *“I can still learn new things and do new things”*
- *“I could be more myself, not constrained by what other people might think.... It was freeing”*

Connection and Community

Demonstrates or discusses a sense of connection to others in the ensemble

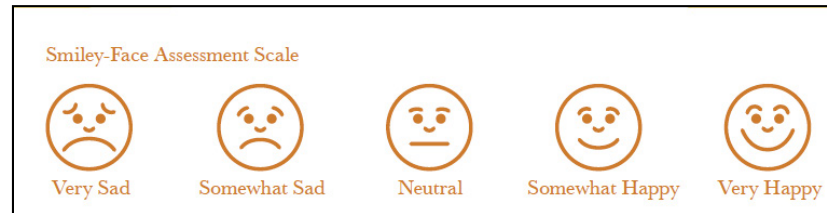
- *“I felt trust and friendship...I felt security”*
- *It’s like if we were all on a ship or something, we would want everybody to keep it from sinking”*
- *“I think that most of us, especially myself, have a real bad problem. I can’t concentrate on one thing...you know, so many other people, have the same problem”*

Cultivating Success

Facilitator's encouragement, guidance, and flexibility that contributes to member's mastery of improv concepts, self confidence, or a sense of ability to succeed.

- *“Today was a huge day today. We took big steps forward. And I just want to say thank you to all of you for playing because you know 90% is just showing up and saying yes to playing and trying something new. And you all did it”*
- *“Whatever a person brings to the table, we say “Yes!” And not only do I like your idea but I’m going to work with you”*
- *“(This is all about) Trusting yourself and the ideas that come to you and trusting other people will be there with you”*
- *“If you are using a different hand but you are using all of your concentration, you are still going to get it. We are trying to listen with our wholes selves and concentrate on the other person as much as we can. And if we’re using a different hand in the end it doesn’t really matter. You’re still succeeding”*

Smiley Face Scale Results



Pre – 4.1

Post – 4.5

Facilitation Lessons Learned

Two steps only – engage in activities that can be led by giving only one- or two-step directions at a time

Model – show activities by modeling with another facilitator, or a participant, first

Use most familiar words/use multiple words

- imagine, pretend
- observe, look closely, see
- What did you notice? What did you experience?; What did you think? What did you feel?

Provide on-going positive feedback & support

- provide ongoing feedback & encouragement
- generously use non-evaluative & supportive feedback like “yes,” “okay,” “thank you,” “you’re doing it;” avoid evaluative feedback like “very good,” “great,” “excellent,” “wonderful”
- challenge & don’t let participant off the hook too easily; however, ALWAYS provide An authentic “way out”

Keep the pace up – run a relaxed but highly focused room, with a quite steady pace

Check in with group self reflection at least 1x session – pause once or twice during the session to invite reflection & highlight main points; start with describing: “Who will describe what we just did. It’s okay to be obvious.” Follow with reflection: “What did you notice? What did you experience while doing that?” OR “What were some things you thought about while we did that? What are some things you felt”

When in doubt...

- start with description (“I see you passing the apple to Alice.” “This room is cold.”)
- stick with the literal (“We are in a room high above the ground.”)

Be willing to improvise/change your activity – stick with what you want to accomplish/teach, but be willing to change HOW you accomplish it; you WILL need to adjust activities; “act, observe, adjust”

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Summary of Findings

Overall, results show Memory Ensemble sessions yield feelings of success, optimism, hope, normalcy, confidence, reduction of stigma, connection & sense of empowerment among the participants.

“It’s a no-brainer, excuse the pun” - ME Member 2013

"I am not sure that my memory has objectively improved, but I'm sure that my ability to cope with memory loss has improved."- 2011 Participant

Winter 2018 video



The Memory Ensemble.mp4

Further Resources/Reading

- The Arts and Aging: Building The Science
<http://www.creativeaging.org/publications-research/white-papers/>
- Creativity Matters: The Arts and Aging Tool Kit
<http://www.artsandaging.org/>
- Mindful Improv: Improv for Personal Growth
<https://mindfulimprov.com/>
- Northwestern Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer's Disease Center
<http://www.brain.northwestern.edu/>
- “Yes And” Improv and Psychology Conference
<https://yes-and-mental-health.site123.me/>

Representative Literature

Arts, Improvisation, Dementia

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Participants & Families

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