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Web Exclusive

Maureen Schmitter-Edgecombe's work to help people with memory loss

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by Cherie Winner | © Washington State University

Whether the problems stem from normal aging, diseases like Alzheimer's, or traumatic brain injury, impaired memory can turn even routine tasks into major challenges. The main focus of Maureen Schmitter-Edgecombe's work is finding ways to help people with memory loss cope better with everyday tasks, enabling them to live independently as long as possible.

In one recent project, she coached volunteers with memory loss in the use of a notebook that resembled a detailed day planner. They recorded what happened as each day went along, including what they did, when, and with whom. That helped them with content, source, and temporal ordering memory. They also wrote down things they wanted to do each day, a tactic designed to help clients whose prospective memory was not good. Each client's spouse also participated, and all the clients and spouses met as a group once a week to discuss their experiences with the journal.

"The social support aspect of it I think ended up being just as important" as the notebooks themselves, she says. "The people were coming together around something they felt they could do to help with the dementia process. It can be very difficult to talk about these issues, so a lot of the members felt this was a very safe place to talk about the memory problems that they were having, and people would listen and understand."

To read more about this project, see "Research to understand, intervene," by Hope Belli Tinney (<http://www.wsutoday.wsu.edu/Content/Publications/wsutoday%2003-03-06.pdf>).

Schmitter-Edgecombe is now collaborating with Diane Cook of WSU's [School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science](#) to create "smart" apartments for people with impaired cognitive function. Motion sensors in the rooms monitor the resident's activities. A computer program then uses that information to remind the resident to do tasks such as turning off the stove or taking medications at specific times, or to notify a caregiver if something is amiss, such as the person standing in one spot for an extended period. Cook and her students are designing the network of sensors and developing the software that will interpret the information the sensors provide. Schmitter-Edgecombe brings in the human factors such as expected activity patterns and where people with memory loss are likely to have the most trouble.

"We know that if we can keep people in their homes just a little bit longer, that will provide significant savings to society," says Schmitter-Edgecombe. "It also is very meaningful for the person and their caregivers to be able to do that in a way that's going to show good quality of life."

The project is supported by the state's [Life Sciences Discovery Fund](#). For more information, see "Neuropsychologist collaborates on 'smart' homes for independent living," by Gail Seigel

(<http://newsletter.wsu.edu/chronicle/08december/smart-home.html>), and “No place like home” by Becky Phillips (<http://www.wsutoday.wsu.edu/Content/Publications/wsutoday%2009-05-08.pdf>).

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