

# Bridging the distance for caregivers dealing with dementia

By **Monica Fleck**

**T**he onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic struck nearly every aspect of life with a quick and stunning blow. Within the fallout, particularly for our more vulnerable senior population, lay a particularly impacted segment – those who are caring for someone with dementia at home. No longer available were the adult day programs, where caregivers would send their loved ones for quality programming and respite for themselves, nor the standard in-person services, such as support groups, overnight respite, or on-site counselling.

“We saw an immediate and urgent need to help caregivers in their important roles at home,” says Karen Johnson, director of McCormick Dementia Services in London, Ontario. “We pulled together all our available staff resources to find ways to help people meet the challenges presented by the pandemic, and relied heavily on our creative and technological skills.”

Caregivers often find themselves confronted by the constant demands of caring for their loved ones, who can often be in a high-needs category. They may face challenges helping the person with meals, bathing, providing personal care, and seeking outlets for entertainment and meaningful engagement, all while keeping the person safe.

In response, McCormick Dementia Services, home to Ontario’s largest dementia-specific day program, began to quickly develop several virtual resources to help caregivers in their important role. While social work support delivered one-on-one by phone was already available, staff also wanted to teach caregivers a number of different strategies on how to provide the various types of care required. The solution was to develop the Caregiver’s Corner website, which contains a variety of presentations and videos delivered by care



support and recreation staff members that address personal care, recreation activities, and strategies for managing day-to-day tasks.

“The site marked a significant step toward empowering caregivers with the knowledge of what to do and how to do it,” says Johnson.

For example, the nursing and personal care portion of the site contains detailed instructional videos on how to dress someone with dementia, how to respectfully administer medications if the person is reluctant, and how to prepare and serve different types of food for a pleasant and safe dining experience. In addition, the recreational section of the website has a wide choice of games, puzzles, exercises and modules on many general-interest topics, such as music, celebrities, countries and national holidays.

“I realized while being at home with my mom that she was no longer capable of just tagging along with what I was doing or a version of it, so I’ve found that I have to plan specific things to do with her,” says


Irene\*, a caregiver whose mother regularly attended the McCormick Day Program. “I have so far used the Caregiver Tips section, which I found very helpful, particularly understanding behaviours, as well as the daily schedule, which has been most useful. There is a lot on the site; it is very well organized. We haven’t explored even half of it yet, but we will!”

Technology has also enabled McCormick Dementia Services to offer connectedness through support groups, exercises classes and social time delivered via Zoom videoconferencing. “Often, the best assistance we can provide is to connect caregivers with each other to remind them that they are not alone in this journey,” says Johnson. “Group members often provide a tremendous lift in spirits and much-needed friendship. Another thing we have discovered is the positive impact our Zoom programs are having on our clients; they are loving it, and caregivers are grateful that their loved one is engaged in something fun.”

Facebook has also become an ideal way to support caregivers. In May, McCormick Dementia Services began offering live-stream sessions twice a week that highlight staff and programming updates, art therapy instruction, crossword and trivia clubs, ideas for outdoor games and activities, strategies for keeping wandering people safe and tips on managing responsive behaviours.

“One of our caregivers called to tell us how he has been watching our videos,” says Johnson. “He said that the one on tips and tricks to provide care was very helpful when toileting his mom. He was very thankful.”

“I want to thank the staff for all the hard work that went into this outreach,” says Irene. “It is truly a wonderful resource, and is saving my sanity right now!”

\*Please note that names have been changed for privacy reasons. For more information, please visit [mccormickdementiaservices.ca](http://mccormickdementiaservices.ca). 

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