The Power of Self-Worth: Tips on Validation Therapy for Memory Loss

A sense of self-worth is vital for anyone to experience a full life. When we feel respected and accepted as we are, we are able to be at peace with ourselves and those around us. These are the ideas that created what is known in caregiving as the validation method. The validation method and validation therapy work to remedy the decrease in self-worth experienced by those with memory loss. Through practicing genuine empathy, caregivers can enter a person’s reality, accept them where they are and show them that they still matter.

What Is Validation Therapy?

The validation method was developed by social worker Naomi Feil in the early 1980s. While working with seniors with cognitive decline, Feil became disappointed with the common practices of dealing with disoriented older adults. She witnessed as their social and emotional needs were frequently dismissed, and saw the consequences of such neglect. The validation method views seniors with memory loss as special and worthwhile during the final stages of their disease. At its core, validation therapy is a communication method that reaches beyond just the person’s immediate physical needs.

Main Components of Validation Therapy

Validation therapy rests on the belief that there is always a reason for person’s behavior. According to an interview with Naomi Feil with the Validation Training Institute, Inc., there are three basic human needs that determine much of the behaviors those with memory loss express.

1. Humans have the need to feel love, nurturing and security.
2. Humans have the need to feel useful and respected for their work.
3. Humans have the need to express their emotions and have someone truly listen.

Putting Validation Therapy into Practice

Validation is an intentional approach to every interaction you have with a person with memory loss. It requires extreme empathy, being able to recognize and understand what another person is feeling. Being empathetic to a person with memory loss requires accepting the person where they are, eliminating judgment by understanding their behaviors have a reason, and truly listening to them, even if they can't speak.

The benefits of validation therapy are remarkable when it's practiced regularly. Although it takes time, Feil shares that seniors who are validated feel safe, experience less anxiety and stress and have a lesser need for medications. People who shut themselves inside begin to talk again. They begin to sing if they can’t talk. They feel empowered to get up and walk, even though they’ve been sedentary for a long time.
Caregivers feel the benefits, too. They experience much less stress. They have tools they can use to communicate with the person, leading to a much more rewarding caregiving experience. And, they can feel as though they are making a huge difference in the person’s daily life by allowing them to feel appreciated and worthwhile.

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