

Student research focuses on friendship, dementia

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<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/2728/student-research-focuses-on-friendship-dementia/>

Friendship remains an important aspect of life for people with mild to moderate dementia, according to a recent University of Wisconsin Oshkosh study.

Research by UW Oshkosh alumnus David Gavel '10, of Oshkosh, suggests that social interaction among people with dementia should be encouraged in residential care settings.

During his final semester at UWO, Gavel conducted the study with the help of two other undergraduate students, as part of an advanced research class with psychology professor Susan McFadden. The researchers considered how friendships were developed and maintained among 17 people with dementia living in community-based residential facilities.

Previous beliefs about dementia held that people with mild to moderate symptoms no longer experienced or were aware of their social interactions, contributing to the common practice of isolating the residents in their rooms, Gavel said.

“In recent years, research has shown that people with dementia do interact and benefit from friendship,” he said. “We know that there are plenty of positives, and relationships should be supported.”

Gavel’s study sought to further evaluate and characterize friendships among people with dementia.

“Dave’s work fits well with my research on social relationships among persons who have dementia,” McFadden said. “His work also is very much in line with the theme of an upcoming book that I wrote with my husband called ‘Aging Together: Dementia, Friendship and Flourishing Communities.’”

Through behavioral observation, personal interviews and a creative storytelling activity, two key themes emerged in the study. The first theme related to the idea that the significance of friendship is linked to time spent together.

Some study participants found comfort in just spending time physically near each other with little or no conversation, Gavel said. Others indicated they didn’t have friends because they hadn’t yet had enough time at the residential care facility to develop such relationships.

The second theme involved friendship as an all-or-nothing concept for people with dementia; some who were asked indicated “everybody” is their friend while others said “nobody” is their friend.

Gavel noted that personality traits might play a part in the second theme. Some study participants who said they had no friends also indicated that they preferred to spend time alone, while those who said they were friends with everybody reported helping out around the house and taking part in activities.

Gavel said his research can serve as a pilot for future, larger-scale studies related to friendship and dementia.

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