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Dufferin libraries to offer cognitive kits in collaboration with Alzheimer?s Society

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Three Dufferin County libraries are giving local families a new way to support cognitive engagement through a partnership with the region's Alzheimer Society.

Libraries in Orangeville, Shelburne and Grand Valley are collectively supporting a new Cognitive Kit program offered by the Alzheimer's Society of Dufferin County.

The organization's executive director, Teresa Waldner, said the program provides themed kits that can be borrowed through the libraries and used by people living with dementia or cognitive challenges, as well as their caregivers and families.

?It's a pilot project within the three libraries,? she said. ?We worked with them to come up with themes that they thought would be the best suited for their community members. They're self-contained and full of complete instructions about how best to use them to engage with people who might have a cognitive decline.?

The first three themes are animals, music and farming, with plans to update the themes as the program develops.

The kits build on a program the Alzheimer Society has already been using with clients.

Internally known as Montessori kits, they are based on Montessori principles and have traditionally been customized for individuals based on their interests, past experiences and abilities. Staff have used them in homes and hospitals to provide meaningful activities and engagement.

The library version required adapting that individualized approach for a broader audience. Recreation therapist Amy Syme, who has experience working with the kits both in hospital and at the Alzheimer Society, helped develop the new versions along with her coworker and fellow recreation therapist Nina Lirio.

?These kits that are in the libraries will be a little bit more general because they'll be looking for more people to be able to use them,? she said. ?It was definitely a little bit of trial and error; it was very important to make sure that we hit all different levels because everyone is at a different point in their journey, and same with the caregivers and what they can provide.?

The team drew on its experience with clients to create kits containing a variety of activities and difficulty levels, while keeping the instructions simple and accessible. Materials are laminated for repeated use, and written components use large, bold text.

Each kit contains roughly 12 to 15 items, offering different ways to interact. The music kit, for example, includes a radio, miniature musical instruments, familiar songs, photographs, a matching activity, colouring and a painting project that doubles as a music box. The animal kit includes a stuffed animal to provide a tactile experience.

There is no single correct way to use the kits. Someone might listen to music, examine photographs, read, colour, hold an object or work through a matching activity. Activities can take only a few minutes, but a kit can also provide enough material for an extended visit. The goal is to spark memories, conversations and connections, rather than complete a particular task.

That flexibility can also benefit caregivers by providing a starting point for interaction and a shared activity. A familiar photograph, song or object can lead to memories and conversations that might not otherwise arise.

?The fun of a Montessori kit is that everything is meant to be flexible,? Syme said. ?So if they want to just look at the photos of the matching game, then they can just look at the photos? But for someone who's maybe a bit higher functioning, they can match the words to the pictures. There's no right or wrong to any of the activities; there are a lot of different ways to use them.?

The program also aims to make cognitive support more approachable. The kits avoid Alzheimer Society and dementia-related branding on individual items, helping reduce stigma and making them something that can be borrowed from a library like any other community resource.

The original partnership grew from discussions about expanding Alzheimer Society services beyond Orangeville. Library staff received training on introducing and using the kits, while the libraries helped shape the program and its materials.

?From my view, living in Dufferin County for this long, the Alzheimer's Society tended to be a bit more Orangeville-centric, and our mandate is to serve the entire community,? Waldner said. ?So a lot of my focus is around how we best support the whole community, and any time that we can partner with other community organizations, it's a win for all of us.?

?My staff is meeting with the libraries consistently to see if there's some feedback around something we can do differently, and then to change those themes up as the program grows to meet different needs.?

The rollout comes as demand for dementia support continues to increase.

The Alzheimer Society reports that referrals have doubled compared with the same period last year, adding urgency to efforts to make services more accessible across Dufferin County.

By bringing the kits into familiar community spaces, the program aims to make cognitive engagement, caregiver support and connections to dementia services easier to access throughout the county.