

# Interactive Simulated-Dementia Experience Is an "Eye-Opener"

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Chances are you have interacted with someone who has dementia and may have felt that the conversation was challenging for both you and that person. Interactions such as these are very frustrating, concerning and overwhelming for all involved. On May 10, Michelle Hamilton and Jenn Hozempa from Cornerstone at Milford (see ad below) visited the Bellingham Senior Center to provide interactive Dementia Sensitivity Training. The aim of this program was to educate participants about Alzheimer's Disease and related dementia and how best to communicate with someone experiencing memory loss and the unique challenges faced by that person. This program was offered as part of Cornerstone's Dementia Friendly Communities Initiative.

To start the program, we were given props to wear that were meant to simulate certain physical and cognitive limitations that someone with dementia might experience, including neuropathy, arthritis, hearing and dexterity loss, and visual impairment. Participants were then paired up to go into a simulated apartment and were given instructions to complete four common daily tasks: paying bills, organizing medication, preparing breakfast and dressing each other. Sounds pretty easy, doesn't it? However, because of the sensory modifications we had been given, almost no one in attendance was able to complete these "simple" tasks correctly.

After everyone had gone through the simulated



Cornerstone's Michelle Hamilton (left) & Jenn Hozempa

dementia experience Michelle and Jenn explained the "why" behind their program. The tasks we had been asked to do had given us a glimpse into the unique challenges faced by someone who has dementia, like mixing up bill payments, mismanaging medications, struggling to prepare a nutritious breakfast, and having to rely on the help of a caregiver to get ready each day.

Michelle and Jenn then provided the second module of the training, Understanding Dementia in the Real World, to provide us with better insight into the true definition of dementia, different forms it may take, and some startling statistics:

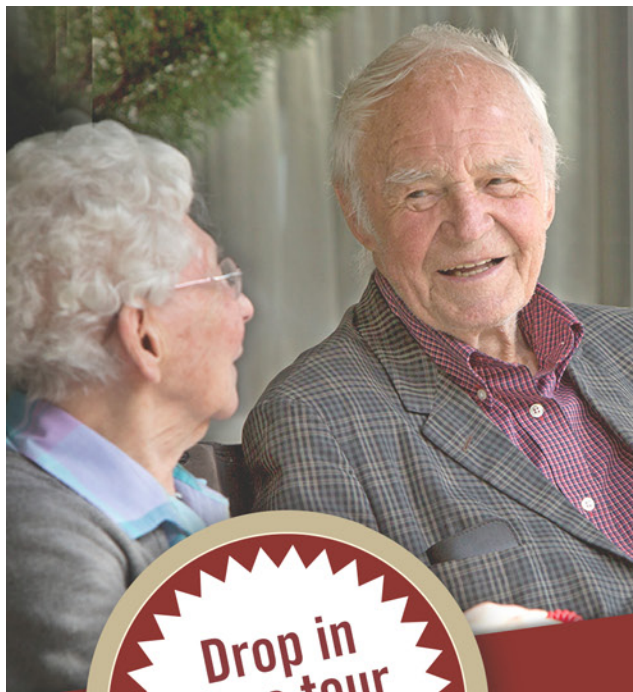
- 120,000 people in Massachusetts live with dementia.
- 5 million Americans are affected.
- 50% of dementia cases are undiagnosed (some

of this may be because women generally outlive men).

Despite these daunting statistics, there are ways we can learn to become more "dementia friendly" in order to facilitate our daily interactions with those who are struggling with dementia:

- Be aware of your body language: Smile and do not cover your mouth while communicating.
- Choose your words strategically: Words should be clear and in simple sentences. Speak slowly and calmly. Allow for words to be processed and understood. Avoid using words like "don't" and instead use words with "do."
- Use visual cues: Point to specific objects or use pictures on a chart or menu to help communicate.
- Be respectful: Do not treat the adult like a child. Don't condescend or command or argue.
- Watch your tone: Tone and pitch are perceived before the words that are spoken.
- Be patient: Extra time helps, whether it is for comprehension, counting money or making a decision. Don't rush someone with dementia.
- Assist, but don't take over: Offering help can be positive, but taking over reduces confidence and feelings of independence. Instead, complete the task along with someone suffering from dementia.

Attendees left this eye-opening presentation with a lot of useful tips to better communicate with those with dementia. For more information, or to learn how this educational training can be brought to you, please visit [www.DFCommunities.org](http://www.DFCommunities.org).



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