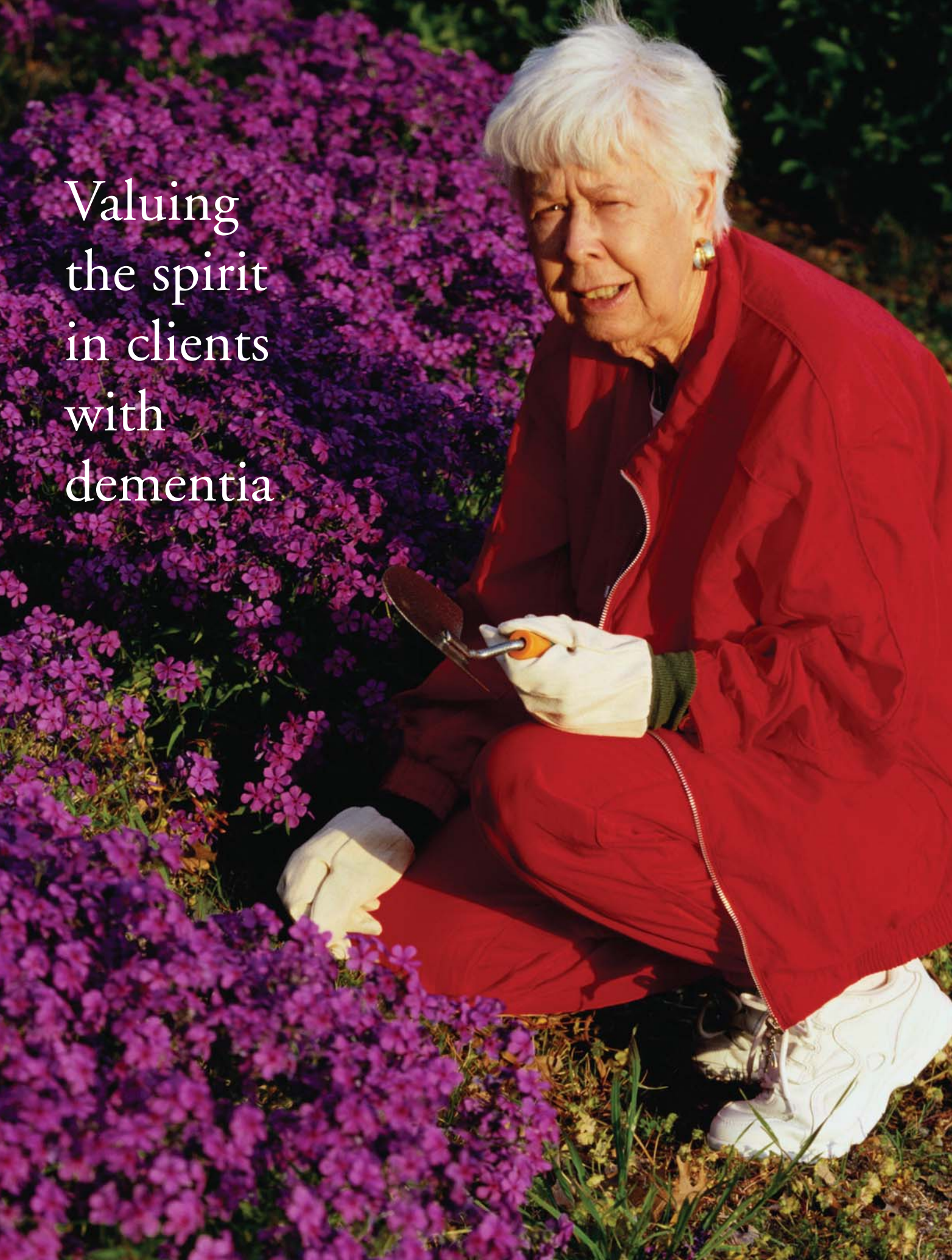


Valuing  
the spirit  
in clients  
with  
dementia



**This clinical theologian urges fitness and wellness professionals to recognize and appreciate the human spirit in individuals with a brain dysfunction**

by Donald R. Koepke, MDiv

When contemplating how fitness and wellness professionals might encourage mental and cognitive health in older adults, it is important to explore the effects of dementia on these efforts. For, on its surface, dementia seems to remove the very characteristics of the person being encouraged and developed.

Instead of being able to judge what is best for the self, people with dementia lose the capacity to consider consequences of actions, because they often have little regard for the past or future. Many of these individuals have difficulty remembering the way to the bathroom, much less remembering more complex tasks. They truly live in the moment.

What should fitness and wellness professionals do with clients who have dementia? Refer them to some other professional? Ignore them? Treat them as though they do not have a brain dysfunction?

Americans have bought into that famous quote by French philosopher René Descartes: "I think, therefore, I am." But what happens when someone can no longer think in a way our culture normally recognizes? Would such a person cease to exist? Most people would answer "No," yet their behavior reveals something else.

In what Stephen Sapp, chair of the University of Miami's Department of Religious Studies, calls "hyper-cognitive culture," we praise cognitive ability and

fear cognitive loss. Many times I have heard people say of a parent with dementia, "Dad (or Mom) doesn't seem to be there any more." These individuals feel as though the dementia has *stolen* their loved ones. In fact, family members often describe dementia as *the long good-bye*. And my own feeling upon the death of my father, who had vascular dementia, was to discover that I had grieved his passing many years before.

But there is a different way of viewing a person with dementia. In an interview following his dramatic presentation at the 1989 American Society on Aging conference, noted psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl spoke about the *spirit* of someone with dementia. "The human spirit is unassailable," Frankl told interviewer Mel Kimble, founder of the Center for Aging, Religion and Spirituality. "[Life] may take what a person has, but not what a person is. I can lose my ability to use symbols or words, such as in aphasia. I may lose my ability to make myself understood, to write, or use my mouth to talk. These are but instruments," he said. "A person may, by psychosis or Alzheimer's or old age, be impaired as to the instrumental or expressive function of their organic make-up. But no one can be impaired in their innermost core as a human being." Frankl continued, "Beyond verbal expression or using instruments, [the spiritual core of the human person can be witnessed] by just a look, just a smile, just a tear running down."

In 1999, Susan McFadden, of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, made a notable comment about the behavior of those with dementia, during a lecture she gave at the Gerontological Pastoral Care Institute in St. Paul, Minnesota. In a presentation titled "Actions, Feelings and Values: Foundations of Meaning and

Personhood in Dementia," the psychology professor stated that students in a nursing home "observed that the residents showed concern for one another, initiated social contact, even got irritated with one another..." Interestingly, the residents "didn't hold grudges," she added.

In *The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care* (1997), authors Virginia Bell and David Troxel noted that someone with dementia remains very human indeed. In fact, this individual is (and continues to be) a person:

- of infinite value
- with a name
- with a spirit
- with feelings
- with a will and a personality
- with a life story
- who has a physical environment
- who has the present moment

Yes, there are deficits and challenges—even frustrating behaviors—linked with dementia. But an individual with a brain dysfunction may still be, according to Bell and Troxel, someone who:

- gives and receives love and affection
- can reminisce and respond to stories from others
- is compassionate and concerned
- enjoys verbal and nonverbal communication
- can be surprisingly flexible
- has a sense of humor
- is productive
- has intact social graces
- maintains old skills and talents
- thrives on the arts
- has excellent hand-eye coordination
- experiences all 5 senses
- responds to the experience of new information

*Continued on page 74*

# Valuing the spirit in clients with dementia

Continued from page 73

What do adults with dementia need? They need to feel connected to people and to their environment. They need to feel competent and useful. They need to love and be loved, to succeed, and to have hope. They need to have a sense of control, to be respected and appreciated, to have the opportunity to share, and to feel as though they belong. In other words, they need to be treated like human beings, and valued.

Individuals with dementia have much to teach the world. They live in the now, without being haunted by past failures or future fears. They are free, laugh at the smallest thing, and say what others believe but are too embarrassed to say. They offer a fresh perspective on the world—and perhaps a clearer understanding that to be human is more about who one is, rather than what one does.

Fitness and wellness professionals have a significant opportunity to enhance the cognitive and personal wellness of people who have dementia. And they can interact more meaningfully with these men and women by valuing the spirit in each individual. How? As a start, professionals can try being open with these clients, instead of pitying them. Receptive, instead of uneasy. Curious, instead of frustrated. Who knows what they might discover through this willingness to learn? [Ed. Readers will find a list of practical tips for communicating with clients with dementia on this page.]

There is more to being human than what our senses lead us to believe. Individuals with dementia might have lost the ability to remember or to make judgments, but they still have a heart, a soul, an essence. Underneath, they remain the same people. They need only to be *accessed* in a different way. ☺

*Donald R. Koepke, MDiv, is the director of the California Lutheran Homes' Center for Spirituality in Aging, headquartered in Anaheim, California. Readers can learn more about the Center at [www.spiritualityandaging.org](http://www.spiritualityandaging.org). They may also subscribe to the Center's free monthly e-newsletter on spirituality and aging by sending an email request to [dkoepke@frontporch.net](mailto:dkoepke@frontporch.net).*

## References and recommended readings

Bell, S. M. (2000). *Visiting Mom: A Guide for Visiting Elders with Alzheimer's*. Sedona AZ: Elder Press.

Bell, V., & Troxel, D. (1997). *The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care*. Baltimore MD: Health Professions Press.

Center for Spirituality and Aging. (2004). *Caring for Elders: Body, Mind and Spirit*, an educational DVD applying the concepts of Viktor Frankl to aging, with M. Kimble, PhD. Available from [www.spiritualityandaging.org](http://www.spiritualityandaging.org).

Frankl, V. (1959). *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York NY: Simon and Schuster.

Frankl, V. (1988). *The Will to Meaning*. New York NY: Meridian Books.

Grollman, E. A., & Kosick, K. S. (1996). *When Someone You Love Has Alzheimer's*. Boston MA: Beacon Press.

Kimble, M. (Ed.) (2000). *Viktor Frankl's Contribution to Spirituality and Aging*. New York NY: Haworth Press.

Sapp, S. (2002). *When Alzheimer's Disease Strikes!* Palm Beach FL: Desert Ministries.

Thomas, W. (2004). *What are Old People For?* Acton MA: VanderWyk and Burnham.

## Nineteen tips for communicating with a client with dementia

by Marge Coalman, EdD

1. Do not talk to the client as if he/she is not present.
2. You need the client's attention to start communication.
3. Minimize distractions.
4. Move slowly and approach from the front, rather than the side or behind.
5. Look eye to eye.
6. Call the client by his/her preferred name.
7. Make your verbal and nonverbal messages the same.
8. Use simple, adult-appropriate words.
9. Don't patronize.
10. Slow your rate of speech.
11. Give one message at a time.
12. Listen for a response and allow time for the client to respond.
13. Repeat the question or request using the same words, if necessary.
14. Be patient and keep it simple.
15. Acknowledge the client's concerns and questions.
16. Use words that express respect and understanding.
17. Give the client your undivided attention.
18. Use appropriate touch if the client enjoys it.
19. Look friendly: Your attitude is contagious.

*The above list accompanied the article "The invisible population," published in the September/October 2002 issue of the Journal on Active Aging. This article explains what fitness and wellness practitioners need to know to train clients with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. ICAA members can access this article in the Journal Archives in the members only section of the ICAA website.*