

Pop-ups & Pictures: Collections for Cognitive Decline

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There is a unique and growing population which is often ignored in public libraries: the elderly, especially those who may be suffering some cognitive decline. They need books, but not just any book. According to Dr. Richard Restak (2022), one early sign of memory issues and/or mild cognitive impairment (MCI) is giving up on fiction, because following a story from beginning to end can be a complex cognitive task. In addition, the physical format and design of a book can also affect reading and comprehension. Finding appropriate materials that are easy to follow, comfortable to read, and yet still geared towards adults can be challenging, but it is possible and can really make a difference for this often-overlooked group of patrons.

My Story: The Library at Willamette View

After 30-plus delightful years as a librarian, I retired, and about five years after that I moved to Willamette View, a continuing care retirement community in southeast Portland. Initially, I was hesitant to volunteer but soon was enticed onto the library committee where I now serve as chair. When visitors enter our Manor building, the first thing they see is an open, welcoming library like the best small public libraries (see Figure 1). Our community has an excellent library system with three main branches (each located in a different building on campus), a “grab & go” collection of paperbacks which are not cataloged and do not require checkout, and four “mini-libraries” in the licensed care facilities (see Figure 2). We use an integrated library system that includes an online catalog, streamlines operations, and helps us maximize productivity. Over 55 volunteers (including retired librarians) keep the library branches on our campus running smoothly.

When COVID-19 struck in 2020, just as I moved into the community, everything was restricted to try to curb the spread of the virus. No new books were added to the mini-libraries and during the next three years they disintegrated. When I became chair of the committee, pandemic restrictions were ending and the three main branch libraries were still in excellent condition. However, the state of the mini-libraries for the assisted living and memory care residents was dismaying. The books there were primarily dense works of fiction that had been withdrawn from the branch libraries and were totally unsuited for residents with cognitive challenges.



Figure 1
The Willamette View Manor library Branch with a Puzzle Table



Figure 2
A Willamette View Mini-library

Finding Appropriate Titles

I conducted some research and became convinced to look for books that are styled with the appeal and simplicity of a children's book but created for adult audiences. Some children's books may be appropriate, but books created for adults are often better. It's as important to avoid "talking down" to adults as it is to children. Books for this group of patrons must be mentally

suitable, and they also must be physically suitable. For example, coffee table books may be mentally suitable, but too heavy and large for a physically frail person to easily lift and handle. They also should be free of dense text, with adequate white space on all pages. Books in the style of children's books but geared towards adults often fit these criteria.

Ideal books feature vivid photographs and appealing content written in clear, concise, easy-to-read sentences with large print (The Ridge Senior Living, n.d.). Luckily, many such books exist. *Blue Sky, White Clouds* (Sobel, 2012) is an example of an attractive book designed for a patient with dementia. Other recommended authors include Lydia Burdick, John Moher, Hugh Morrison, Judi Parkinson, Matthew Schneider, Emma Rose Sparrow, and Jamie Stonebridge. Although not all books by these authors are recommended for patrons with MCI, many are suitable. According to the website for Lydia Burdick's *Wishing on a Star: A Read-Aloud Book for Memory-Challenged Adults* (2009), reading books such as these will "stimulate conversation and reminiscence, encourage physical closeness and interaction, provide a calming diversion from an upsetting episode, inspire intergenerational exchanges with children, increase social interaction between staff and residents, and promote reading skills in residents" (Health Professions Press, n.d.). Finally, in my experience at Willamette View, it seems that patrons with MCI often enjoy books about animals, nature, national parks, the ocean, the jungle, and the solar system. They also enjoy books about earlier times, such as the 1940s and 1950s.

Books can be an extremely useful aid for us as we age. Health Professions Press, the publisher of the Two-Lap Book Series meant to be read aloud to adults, notes that "books provide a natural and unlimited opportunity to rebuild connections for the person with dementia, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and related disorders" (n.d.). The curators at The Alzheimer's Store have also claimed that "picture books can also help us reminisce, as images are a very powerful way to access memories. They can help increase communication, whether it's with relatives, caregivers, or friends. If used in a group setting, they can bring individuals with cognitive impairment together and can be used as an entertaining activity that helps combat boredom, or even depression" (n.d.).

Books with sound are another option to consider, since they can be used to encourage stimulating activities. Pop-up, lenticular, scanimation, "photicular" or integrated photography type books require no planning or preparation. Techniques in integrated photography books involve an animation process that creates the illusion of movement in each picture. The visible image moves and changes with the perspective of the viewer.

Pop-up books such as the ones by renowned authors Robert Sabuda or Matthew Reinhart are amazing works of art enjoyed by seniors and youth alike. Glow-in-the-dark books, such as *Constellations: A Glow-in-the-Dark Guide to the Night Sky* (Sasaki & Flinn, 2006) and other books that have a lift-the-flap, pull-the-tab, and turn-the-circle activity intrigue adults as well as children. Books with texture invite one to feel and touch, whether it's soft and furry or coarse and rough-textured.

Promoting Engagement and Wellness Through Reading

Like many adults I fear the ravages of dementia and was thrilled to learn about research which shows an association between reading aloud and the prevention of dementia (Çetinkaya et al., 2022). According to research, reading aloud for as little as 10 minutes a day may improve memory, focus, and vocabulary (Nouchi et al., 2016). "Shared reading is one of the most significant

developments to have taken place in mental health practice in the last ten years,” says Dr. David Fearnley, Medical Director of Mersey Care Centre, United Kingdom (Eldercare Home Health, n.d.). Among its other benefits, reading aloud can strengthen emotional bonds and bring joy, comfort, and a sense of belonging. Reading aloud has been shown to be the easiest way to boost your memory (Forrin & MacLeod, 2018), and repeating words out loud to another person has also been linked to better recall. This is because production of one or more sensory aspects allows for more efficient recall of the word (Lafleur & Boucher, 2015). In explaining how this works, Boucher stated, “The brain refers to multisensory information associated with the communication episode, and varying feedback creates differential effects on memory for spoken words,” (Repetition boosts recall, 2015).

In some situations, an interactive storytime might even be appropriate for elderly patrons with MCI. Marie Corbitt, Outreach/Program Librarian at Westerville (Ohio) Public Library, developed “Remember When” for older adults to get them engaged in sharing their own stories and memories (Corbitt, 2015). She has a different theme each month and includes stories, songs, pictures, and props. If seniors are unable to come to the library, the outreach department takes a program to the retirement community! She cautions one to be sensitive as some topics can be difficult because they bring up bad memories. Corbitt tries to find music for each topic, preferably older songs that seniors would know. I found from my own experience that older songs and music are very popular.

Conclusion

With all of this research in mind, the library committee at Willamette View went to work developing the mini-libraries for the assisted living and memory care areas of the facility (see Figure 3). After working with Life Enrichment staff, we added over 100 new books for residents in these areas. Feedback regarding our updated mini-libraries has been overwhelmingly positive. Assisted living residents are taking books from the shelves and looking at them. Life Enrichment staff work with residents using the books to facilitate conversations. And best of all, the books and stories are engaging patrons. One staffer reported on reading the Reinhart *Cinderella* pop-up book to a group of older women. It was magical; when the page turned, the glass slipper literally rose from the page. They were entranced.



Figure 3
Another Willamette View Mini-library

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Additional Resources

There are a number of publishers who specialize in books for and about elderly individuals with a variety of needs, as well as organizations that provide reading recommendations. A selected list of them is below.

- Health Professions Press (HPP), an imprint of Brookes Publishing, focuses on contemporary concerns in gerontology, long-term care, elder care, Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, wellness, aging, etc. HPP's Two-Lap Books® Series provide engaging books with colorful illustrations and short, easy-to-read text.
- Shadowbox Press is a veteran-owned small business located in Richfield, Ohio. Shadowbox Press produces a collection of innovative, high-quality, large-print, interactive books and conversation cards, intended to evoke memories, prompt conversations, and engage dementia patients in a meaningful activity.
- Mighty Oak Books' *Reminiscence Books* series and the *Memory Lane* books are designed for adults, feature mostly photographs, minimal text, and are short and lightweight.
- Sunny Street Books are created for seniors with dementia although they never mention Alzheimer's, dementia, or similar conditions to avoid offending or embarrassing readers. Most books are relatively small, lightweight, with beautiful photographs and uplifting stories.
- The Alzheimer's Association GreenField Library provides a list of reviewed reading materials and recommended authors.
- The Dorling Kindersley (DK) Eyewitness Books (called Eyewitness Guides in the UK) are a series of educational nonfiction books with beautiful illustrations. DK Publishing also produces three-dimensional pop-up books which are marketed for children, but many are suitable for adults as well.

