How Habilitation Helps

May 17, 2013

Habilitation Therapy is a new approach to help those suffering with different forms of dementia to achieve a greater quality of life. See how the BSHC staff is using this technique to help our clients.

The Alzheimer’s Association defines Alzheimer’s as a type of dementia that causes problems with memory, thinking, and behavior. The term “dementia” describes a set of symptoms – loss of memory and other intellectual abilities – rather than a specific disease. Alzheimer’s is the most common form of dementia; estimates from the Alzheimer’s Association report that one in eight older Americans has Alzheimer’s disease. But this disease does not constrain itself to the patients: over 15 million Americans provide unpaid care for a person with Alzheimer’s or other types of dementia. With these numbers growing as the baby boomers age, it is increasingly important to understand the best techniques for providing the best care for those who suffer from dementia in all its forms.

Recently, 14 members of Boston Senior Home Care’s case management and nursing staff as well as two volunteers completed a Habilitation Therapy orientation. But what is Habilitation Therapy and why is it important for our clients and their families?

Habilitation Therapy is a non-medical interpersonal approach that helps a person with a form of dementia to continue to be active and enjoy their day by promoting a positive emotion. The goal of Habilitation Therapy is to maximize the individual’s strengths and abilities while minimizing their limitations. Because providing care for a person with dementia is not intuitive, those involved in their care must learn new responses to deal with their disease.

Boston Senior Home Care direct staff members were introduced to new ways to communicate with clients who have dementia. These included: paying attention to their body language, getting the client’s attention before speaking, slowing down speech, using one step directions and gestures, focusing on a client’s feelings instead of their words, using “therapeutic fiblets,” and employing apologies if the client seemed upset.
Staff also learned how the physical environment can affect the way a client feels and manages day to day. This is important because a person with dementia becomes easily distracted, and has difficulty with too much noise, confusion, and clutter. What the individual sees and hears will have an impact on their mood and behavior. These types of Habilitation therapy techniques along with a supportive environment are keys to good dementia care and allow the person with dementia to be as independent as possible.

With the Habilitation approach, activity and purposeful engagement can make a real difference in the life of the person with dementia. Staff was taught that clients with dementia are often unable to initiate productive and satisfying activities for themselves. Additionally, staff was informed that it is important to connect first emotionally to allow time for clients with dementia to feel comfortable before completing a home visit. This can be done by knowing something about the client’s previous likes and dislikes.

Communication is essential during assessments, but behaviors are often the only way a person with dementia can communicate. Staff learned to recognize that the behavior of a person with dementia has a purpose and when a negative behavior occurs, they now know how to look more closely to find the meaning of this behavior. Staff knows to look for triggers for challenging behaviors to identify why these behaviors might be happening. In addition to helping staff, habilitation therapy helps all caregivers (professional and family) to find solutions to challenging behaviors by reviewing the following questions: should we change our communication? Should we change the environment? Should we offer more activity and purposeful engagement?

The recently trained staff at BSHC will feel more confident in working with a client who has dementia. They can also spread their knowledge by offering these helpful habilitation therapy tips to families with whom they work closely, as well as to the service providers or other individuals who are interested in providing the best care to our clients with dementia.

For more information on Alzheimer’s and related dementias and for tips on how to care for your loved one with dementia, please visit http://www.alz.org/