

# A LITTLE BIT OF THIS & a LITTLE BIT OF THAT

## The Creative Power of 'Collage Conversations'



WRITTEN BY KATYA DE LUISA


**M**ary visited her husband, James, every day at the nursing home. They had been married 48 years when he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and five years ago he had been placed in the facility unable to do much of anything. He wandered incessantly, avoiding eye contact and mumbling incoherently to himself. Although Mary spent hours helping with his care, she didn't really feel that her husband knew her anymore.

When I invited the couple to participate in a weekly collage class that I ran at the nursing home, Mary didn't think James would be able to do it or sit still long enough. However, when they sat down and she began to page through a magazine in search of items to use in the collage, James surprisingly seemed interested.

Mary would point out images and talk about them, and although James would often turn away, he remained seated and actually listened. He began touching pictures he seemed attracted to. His selections seemed to reflect elements the couple shared in their life together, and Mary would talk to him about the memories they triggered. James would remain engaged for more than an hour.

One day, Mary began to sob during the class as she showed the group their collage. It depicted a car, a tractor, basketball players and the words, "I'm OK, I'm Alive" that seemed to leap off the top of the page. Mary tearfully explained that James kept touching these words even though she had been reluctant to cut them out for him.

Up until this point, she candidly revealed, she had felt for years that he didn't know who she was or remember



anything about their time together. Even though the collage pictures he had chosen seemed related to their shared experiences, it was the “I’m OK, I’m Alive” clipping that truly convinced her she had not lost him completely.

When this incident occurred, it had been several months since I had begun developing the collage making process to help persons with dementia. My original goal had been to simply create an art activity everyone could participate in, including those in the later stages of the disease who were non-verbal.

But when Mary made it apparent that James was actually communicating through his picture selections, the light bulbs went off in my mind. I began getting videos from the library that pertained to the workings of the brain, mind and five senses. I devoured the information—sometimes three videos a day. After two months of taking notes, I formulated some common sense theories about why the pictures seemed so effective as a communication tool and how they affected the brain and memory. From there, I developed collage communication techniques and a caregiver training program.

Using visual imagery in a collage format is a powerful medium to facilitate communication and increase personal interaction with individuals in the later stages of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. These “collage conversations” tap into remaining memories and abilities, and can foster bonds between individuals with the disease and their family and professional caregivers.

Collage communication is a simple process of selecting pictures and words from magazines, giving persons with dementia and other speech or cognitive disabilities a way to express their thoughts and feelings. The objective of the collage making process is to facilitate self-expression, communication and social interaction rather than simply use it as an art activity.

The process involves a team approach. A companion engages the individual with dementia by asking him or her to select a color of poster paper; then they flip through a magazine, pointing to pictures while discussing them. When the individual demonstrates interest in a photo or drawing, the partner will ask, “Do you like this picture?” When the person says yes or shows signs of continued interest, the companion tears out the page and begins cutting the image while continuing to talk about it. The teammate puts the clipping in the individual's hand and encourages him or her to select placement on the poster paper.

With persons in the later stages, when signals from the brain to the hands are not functioning well, the companion typically needs to provide more assistance. After the person with dementia selects the poster paper, the partner lays the picture down and places his or her fingers on top of the individual's to move the collage piece. Then, the companion lifts up his or her hand and lets the individual continue. This usually gets the signal flowing, and the person with Alzheimer's disease very slowly finds placement—providing a sense of ownership of the collage. The

*“The collage is a  
PICTURE story of the  
life of its creator.”*

companion glues the image and the individual with dementia pats it down. The duo continues the conversation, repeating the steps until the collage is finished.

Even hospice employees have successfully used collage communication with non-verbal and emotionally withdrawn individuals in the end stages of the disease.

Why is this so effective? We are attracted on both conscious and subconscious levels to pictures that have associations to our past experiences. A dog, any dog, for example, reminds us of our present or past pets and can trigger memories, experiences and emotions connected to these animals.

Creating a conversation between two people is easy if they both have had encounters with dogs. It's a common interest. If the individual with dementia selected a dog, it is because of an emotional connection. Since you are asking what the person likes, the association is a positive one. Not only are the memories of dogs revived, but also the emotions about them are relived.

Throughout our lives, we create new experiences that tap into the information we have accumulated through past events. As dementia advances and communication abilities decrease, a person's ability to create a new experience is hindered.

But when picture selections tied to memories of past experiences are discussed and arranged into a collage,

a new experience is created—one composed of “pieces” of old information or past situations.

The collage is a picture story of the life of its creator. It enables the individual with dementia to not only access remaining memories, but to also feel good about sharing these experiences with another person.

This is especially beneficial when these are shared memories with spouses and other people whom the person with dementia is emotionally connected to. Everyone in the family can join in the collage making and discussions, even the children.

Collage communication offers mutual benefits especially for family members who have begun to emotionally disconnect from a person who is losing or has lost speech and cognitive abilities. It becomes the bridge that enables families to stay in touch with their loved one, thus strengthening their emotional bonds.

For professional caregivers, the picture selection process helps pinpoint an individual’s interests, making it easier to create discussions by finding common experiences. Through

these conversations, a trust and friendship develop, which helps to improve the quality of care they provide.

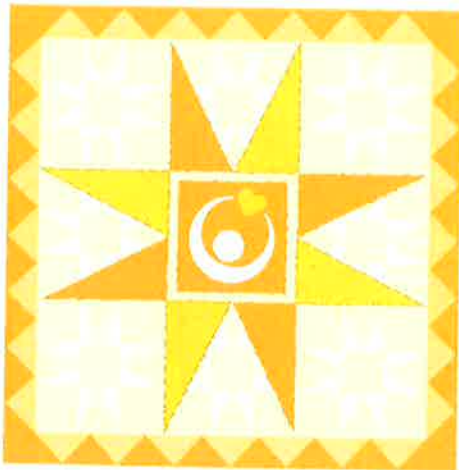
There are other benefits as well besides communication and social interaction when collage communication sessions are regularly scheduled. The activity also increases self-esteem and enables the individual with dementia to express thoughts and feelings. This often improves speech and cognitive thinking, which can help reduce depression and difficult behavior.

We are social beings and our emotional and often physical well-being depends upon our ability to interact and communicate with others. Collage communication is a simple tool that enables access to both.

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**KATYA DE LUISA**, who divides her residence between Costa Rica and Las Cruces, NM, is a professional artist and arts program developer. She exhibits her art both nationally and internationally. Since developing the collage communication program in 2000, De Luisa has conducted caregiver training programs at eldercare organizations throughout the United States and Central America.

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