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THE GOOD LIFE

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Memory Cafés Offer Connection and Support

By Jason Molony, AM, Age & Dementia Friendly Program Director, LifePath

Jason Molony

Once a month at the Northfield Senior Center, a very special gathering happens. People come together for music, food, activities, chatting, or just to catch up. Like so many ways

people come together, attendees share community and connection. But what makes this gathering, called a Memory Café, so special is who attends: people living with dementia, their friends, and care partners. Memory Cafés meet at the Shelburne Senior Center, the Athol Senior Center, the Amherst Senior Center, the Northampton Senior Center, and beyond. From Massachusetts to Alaska and from Europe to Asia, thousands of people living with dementia and their care partners attend Memory Cafés to bring joy and connection in settings that are comfortable and accommodating of memory loss.

A diagnosis of dementia affects families, friends, and communities as well as the person experiencing symptoms. Memories may change, but the need for connection remains. Memory Cafés reduce isolation, offer care partners support and respite, and help build a more dementia-friendly region. LifePath's Age and Dementia Friendly Community Awards help local organizations establish and expand these welcoming programs.

Memory Cafés were developed in the Netherlands in the 1990s by psychologist Dr. Bere Miesen, creating a welcoming gathering place where people living with dementia and their care partners could socialize, share experiences, and reduce stigma. The term “café” is used to evoke an informal, welcoming place for connection and conversation. The model spread rapidly across Europe and North America, with the first U.S. Memory Café opening around 2008. While further research is needed to better understand their long-term impact, existing studies suggest that Memory Cafés can strengthen social connection, provide respite for caregivers, and improve quality of life for people living with dementia and their care partners.

When you walk into a Memory Café, you can expect to find a space that's easy to navigate, and facilitators and staff who understand and are prepared to lend a hand in an environment that is neither clinical nor stigmatizing. In fact, dementia may or may not come up at all.

In Athol, Memory Café participants develop a calendar full of engaging activities, including a group outing to Lake Wyola on July 13. Athol Senior Center Director Cathy Savoy emphasized that they honor people as they are and welcome new and established participants alike into a warm and comfortable environment. Contact the Athol Senior Center for details.

At The Senior Center in Shelburne Falls, the Memory Café has grown from about 12–15

participants to about 20–24 each month. Gatherings include a full meal, activities, and entertainment. Caregivers joke that “It is set up like a wedding reception, just for us!” Music is especially popular, providing good cheer even on difficult days.

The café and caregiver support group also strengthen the West County caregiving community. Longtime caregiver Jill once joined a musician onstage and later said, “I got to sing in front of my tribe!” Another caregiver, Mark, described being welcomed by people who “knew the drill and how to get by day to day” and gave him permission to enjoy a meal and show with new friends. Check The Senior Center in Shelburne for more information.

In Northfield, each Memory Café includes an activity, speaker, or entertainment. A light lunch is available, by reservation only. Call the Northfield Senior Center to reserve yours.

“This program certainly makes a great deal of difference for us. An opportunity to get out and visit as well as participate in interesting activities. Wonderful!” said one Northfield Memory Café attendee. “Coming here always feels comfortable. The meals are wonderful, and the atmosphere makes my wife feel comfortable with her Alzheimer's. Never had a bad time and we look forward to the next time,” said another.



Memory Café at Northfield Senior Center.

Village Neighbors, a Village model organization serving Wendell, Shutesbury, Leverett, and New Salem, holds Memory Cafés as well. Nearby residents should reach out to Village Neighbors at 413-345-6894 to learn about Memory Cafés and other programs to support people

living with dementia and their care partners.

According to Beth Soltzberg, Director of Dementia Support Programs at Jewish Family & Children's Service and a pioneer in the national Memory Café movement, “Memory Cafés meet an important, growing need in a cost-effective way. They are fairly easy to start and run, and easy for folks to make the leap to attend for the first time—they are a gateway to new social connections, referrals to services, and more.”

To start a Memory Café, visit dfamerica.org/memory-cafe-directory to identify nearby cafés to visit. Next, create a free profile through the Memory Café Alliance to access two hours of self-paced training on café operations, dementia and caregiving, and programming. Organizers can also sign up for the Alliance Newsletter and Learning Community for ongoing resources, ideas, and peer support.

There is much to do in building communities that support people with dementia and their care partners. Many of us at LifePath have been impacted by dementia in our own lives, including me, with my father. LifePath is here to help you and the people you care about as well. Call 413-773-5555 to learn more.

To find a Memory Café near you, search the internet for “Memory Café near me,” or ask your local senior center or council on aging.