



Age Institute

# Supporting persons with dementia through peer group discussions

Sirkkaliisa Heimonen  
Line Manager, PhD, RN

Heimonen 021010

# Seniors in the City Project

- The project (2008-2010) aims to develop a method for evaluating an elderly person's situation on a holistic basis and to plan individually tailored support
- The project is focused on supporting elderly peoples' living and participation in an urban environment
- Two special target groups:
  - Persons with difficulties in their physical capacity and mobility
  - Persons with early stage dementia who live at home quite independently without services

# The method of assessing and supporting is based on two factors

- The importance of focusing on a person's own experiences in everyday life
- The importance of building an ongoing process with full information and a deep understanding of the person's situation
  - » Home visits, interviews, observations, discussions

# Special questions regarding the situation of persons with early stage dementia

- How they cope with the new life-situation
- How they define situations in everyday life – what are the individual meanings
- How they deal with challenges in daily life
- What are their personal wishes, interests and resources
- What things they have given up
- What they find to be difficult and why
- What factors support the management in everyday life
- What are their capacities, motivations and feelings
- What are the experienced possibilities and restrictions for participation

# Peer support group

- The aim was to offer a possibility for persons with early stage dementia to share their experiences and to learn from one another how to cope with the new situation
- The basis of this group process was to concentrate on resources in order to empower the participants and to use the lifespan as a frame for this group process

# Participants and group process

- Five women between 75-87 years
- All lived alone at their own homes
- All had close relatives who they could rely on
  
- Eight meetings (1,5 hrs each)
- A defined topic for every meeting
- Same structure in every meeting
- Two group leaders
  
- Lifespan frame & Focus on resources

# Themes

- 1st meeting - getting to know each other and setting up rules of the group process
- 2nd meeting - childhood and teenage years: memories as resources
- 3rd meeting – experiences of memory loss and its effects on everyday life
- 4th meeting – from teenage years to adulthood
- 5th meeting – parenthood
- 6th meeting – the meaning of work and retirement
- 7th meeting – growing old and thoughts of the future
- 8th meeting - evaluation of the process and guiding principles in life

# Discussions

- Memories from childhood, teenage years, marriage, children, worklife, retirement and experiences of growing old
- Discussions about dementing illnesses, memory loss and difficulties in every day life
- The women shared their worries and fears, but also their ways of coping, their feelings about the disease and its effects on everyday life
- They had many individual resources
- The importance of the closest ones
- The challenge to maintain independence and to gradually accept help



# Attitudes and ways of coping

- To keep in a good physical condition
- To be active and to have meaningful actions in life
- To train one's memory functions
- The importance of not giving up and not worrying too much
- The importance of maintaining a positive attitude
- To have practical ways to deal with memory loss
- The importance of enjoying little things in life: to be able to see what is still left and what still brings joy and pleasure

# The experienced meaning of peer group process

The participants

- Found it important to have possibilities to share experiences and thoughts
- Found it interesting to learn about each others' attitudes and ways of coping
- Underlined the role of the group leader, the good atmosphere in meetings and the importance of humour
- Found it very empowering that someone was interested in their experiences and situations

# Peergroup as a method of support

- Evident need to share experiences and thoughts concerning the illness and its effects at the early stages
- Strong need to have emotional support and reassurance
- It was safe to share experiences and thoughts with persons in a similar situation
- It is useful to see how others in a similar situation get along and cope

The feeling of being understood and accepted is important.