Emotional reactions in the first stages of dementia: contributions of the Validation Method

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**OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY**

The aim of this study is:
- To observe and analyze the most frequent emotional manifestations in elderly people in the beginning stages of dementia;
- To register and monitor the psycho-physiological correlates of emotional reactions;
- to verify the efficacy of Validation treatment in reducing the most disturbing emotional states.

**PRELIMINARY REMARKS: THE VALIDATION METHOD**

In the clinical field today, non-pharmacological therapies for dementia are considered as fundamental. The effectiveness of the Validation method (the communication method, created by Naomi Feil, which is based upon empathetic contact with confused elderly and fosters better management of disturbing behavior), can be demonstrated by further observations and evidence at the clinical and scientific level. Validation uses a relational approach, which helps to reduce stress and to maintain the dignity and well-being of the maloriented and disoriented elderly. It is based on a “validating” attitude, starting from the assumption that the elder lives in a personal reality which has to be accepted, shared and recognized. The method can be practiced with individuals or groups.

**INDIVIDUAL INTERVENTIONS**

Validation is a true and appropriate non-pharmacological treatment, which makes use of different techniques depending on the stage of the illness, suitable for facilitating the relationship with the old person affected by dementia, preventing difficult moments and managing behavioral disturbances. The common denominator is the empathic contact, to see from the other person’s perspective as if from our own without losing the ‘as-if’. This gives significance to the daily act of caring. The goal is to confer dignity and restore value to a life that has been lived, that was compromised by the first phases of dementia. The worker also benefits from becoming ‘validating’ in the sense of giving value. The training course to become a Validation Worker is challenging, spread over a period of at least 6 months to allow for implementing continuous and gradual change and to arrive at the end of the course with a mastery of the techniques to be used in a spontaneous way. The goal is to move inside the relationship in the most appropriate manner, while maintaining authenticity.

**SOURCES AND METHODS**

The Validation method has been used with about twenty elderly persons with dementia in the early stages, who frequented day care centers and residential facilities in the province of Milan. The study began in November 2001 and ended in October 2002. As a tool for observation and verification, we used a form specially designed to detect somatic and neurophysiological correlates of the emotional reactions of the elderly persons before and after the treatment. Video recording was also used to analyze the changes in non-verbal communication, from the beginning to the end of the session. The effectiveness of the Validation method has also been tested through the use of the Heart&Emotion instrument, which made it possible to monitor the emotional reactions, using two psychophysiological variables: Galvanic Skin Resistance (GSR) and Heart Rate Variability (HRV).

**RESULTS**

It was observed that the most frequent emotional reactions among elderly persons affected by dementia are anxiety, fear, anger, and sadness, as evidenced by emotional, postural, physiological behaviors.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In this study, the usefulness of the Validation method was confirmed because it resulted in:
- A decrease in anxiety, tension and in some cases, aggression, by allowing the manifestation and expression of emotions;
- A fostering of emotional changes;
- An increase of self-esteem and well-being;
- A reduction in the need for physical and chemical restraints.
- Moreover, the method proved to be interesting and useful for the families involved.

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This work has been possible thanks to the collaboration of Silvia Parenti. 