



## **Being Connected at Mealtimes**

Keller, H.H., Schindel Martin, L., Dupuis, S., Genoe, R., Edward, H.G., & Cassaloto, C. (2010). Mealtimes and being connected in the community-based dementia context. *Dementia* 9(2), 191-213.

## **Mealtimes and dementia**

People with dementia often encounter changes in how mealtimes are experienced. Some common changes involve cooking abilities and food preferences, and these changes can affect nutritional status. For family members or partners in care, shared meals are an important social occasion for the family, but they may also have concerns relating to how dementia impacts these mealtimes. Mealtimes can provide opportunities for socializing, interactions, discussions, and maintaining family and cultural identity. The social aspect of eating food together is a means for solidifying relationships of attachment.

## **What was done?**

This qualitative study was conducted to identify what mealtimes mean to persons with dementia and their family partners in care. Participants were recruited using a number of eligibility criteria and a total of 28 partners in care and 27 people with dementia were interviewed. Participants were interviewed together as a dyad (the partner in care and the person with dementia) and then interviewed individually. Five interviewers collected yearly interviews for three years; the team analyzed these interviews in a group process. The focus of the interviews was on the meaning and experience of mealtimes when a family member has dementia, in addition to investigating how these experiences and meanings impact care partner/care recipient relationships. The specific focus of this paper was on the concept of 'being connected,' which was identified by participants as an important aspect of mealtimes.

## **What was found?**

Mealtimes are a way of being connected. Simply, the act of sitting down to eat a meal provided opportunities for relating and connecting. Specifically, mealtimes reinforced physical, psychological, and emotional ties with self, care partners, family, and broader social networks. In the dementia context, being connected was central to the meaning of the mealtime experience. Connections between persons with dementia and their family care partners were promoted at mealtimes in three ways: being face to face, participating psychologically, and getting and giving support. Being face to face is the physical presence or opportunity to take part in the specific tasks involved in a meal. Participating psychologically involves the cognitive and emotional engagement that occurs while eating a meal. Getting and giving support includes the physical, psychological and emotional support exchanges that occur at mealtimes. For example, people with dementia may need different levels or types of support for eating than was needed in the past. Many families did encounter challenges at mealtimes, though mealtimes were generally considered a good place for positive interactions. Mealtime experiences differed between dyads and within families.

**Importance of this research**

This research suggests that eating meals together on a regular basis can develop and maintain relationships during dementia and may help prevent depression and early institutionalization. By promoting these relationships, it is possible that the nutritional health and the quality of life of both dyad members would also be improved. Assessing the quality of mealtime interactions would be useful for formal health care providers.

**Article brief written by Zoë Martos**