

Cognitive Stimulation Therapy

Allegro Richmond Heights offers CST exclusively with Washington University occupational therapists.

Inaugural Session FAQs & Findings *with Dr. Pat Nellis*

Q. How long has the program been in place at Allegro and how many residents participate in it?

A. The first program launched in June 2022 with two sessions each week and wrapped up in mid-August. 12 residents participated in the first round.

Q. How are residents chosen to participate in the program?

A. Allegro let all the families and residents know about the CST program being offered at the community and educated them on the possible benefits for individuals with mild- to moderate dementia including improved cognition and communication skills. It was a self-selection process for the families.

Q. How does the program work and what types of skills are taught?

A. Cognitive Stimulation Therapy is a twice weekly group that runs for 7 weeks or 14 sessions. The group is based on a couple of principles:

The sessions are consistently delivered and have a structured format – this helps with memory and predictability. We have a group name, a theme song, and start every session with a small piece of orientation to the day, date, weather, season, what we did in the last group, along with singing our song. Prior to the main activity, we engaged in some light physical activity to increase oxygen to the brain for better concentration and also incorporated a news article to weave in current events.

The sessions are themed and by this, we incorporate different activities that are related to a core theme that is tailored to each individual group. For example, at Allegro, we had all women who were similar in age, most of whom worked, but all of whom raised families. We developed themes around those characteristics and incorporated reminiscence therapy components, plus designed hands on activities or “doing” activities.

Overall, CST groups are brief, themed activity groups that draw upon implicit learning and are client centered. It is a non-drug intervention designed to foster strengthening of remaining cognitive skills through participation and doing. Through consistency of format and tailoring for the specific group,

participants are able to share information about themselves, interact with other group members, and practice those cognitive / social skills. The participants are able to exercise choice and make decisions. The group sessions are graded so that the cognitive demand increases ever so slightly over time, adding a bit more challenge. We started out with members sharing what they liked or did and ended up with more complex reasoning by comparing / contrasting and sharing opinions with others.

CST is NOT a group that is concerned with accurate memories or regaining memory. Its focus is to stimulate thought, opinions, thinking, doing and interacting with others. Often times when we start out, members will say something along the lines that they “can’t remember anything” – and we reinforce we’re not trying to necessarily improve memory, but to help them share what they may recall through their stories, opinions and participation in group activities.

Q. What outcomes have residents and staff reported as a result of the program?

A. We saw a number of changes over time. One of the first was improved handwriting for many! Each session they had to sign in and also write their name on a temporary name tag. Towards the end, names were easy to read and handwriting was more smooth. That was likely just pulling up a long lost skill and practicing it, but it led to a great discussion about handwriting skills today and how our digital world has changed what we do.

We also saw an increase in language skills. More willingness to talk and more able to move from answering a basic yes/no question to speaking in sentences, providing opinions, and sharing stories/experiences with others. We saw an increase in overall willingness to participate. Communication became more “spontaneous” vs. us having to draw members in.

We too saw social relationships bloom – they looked out for each other and were concerned when someone was late or did not show up. We saw group members who met others who had the same or similar interests who then took off and pursued those interests together.

Overall, one could say, we saw improvement in quality of life through a standard routine that provided a group focus twice weekly. All this being said, because this is a community group, we did not complete any formal research with these members.

Q. Will the program be expanded to more residents?

A. We will launch the second session after the holidays in early January 2023.