

Digital storytelling helps people with dementia trigger memories

August 23 2017, by Laurie Wang



Myrna Jacques, 77, fights Alzheimer's by creating a digital story about her life with Elly Park, occupational therapy researcher in the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine. Credit: Laurie Wang

For Myrna Caroline Jacques, digital storytelling is her way of fighting

Alzheimer's.

"I thought maybe if I do this and use my brain, the disease won't take over as soon.

"That's my goal," the 77-year-old grandma of five said.

She may be onto something.

A recent UAlberta study on digital storytelling and dementia showed digital storytelling was useful for triggering memories and helping people like Jacques share meaningful stories with loved ones.

"As the people I worked with shaped their own stories, they were able to recall new memories. Even after they watched the story with their loved ones, some of the images would uncover more memories from the past," said Elly Park, principal investigator and assistant clinical lecturer in the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine's Department of Occupational Therapy.

Park worked with seven participants in Edmonton, each at a different stage of dementia. Using the digital storytelling workshop model from Simon Fraser University, Park adapted the program to one-on-one sessions and would visit participants at their home to help build their digital story. Each participant chose their own pictures, music and words, and recorded their own voice as the narrator. After the stories were completed, families and loved ones were invited to watch the stories together.

"Sitting down with the participant to work on the five-minute story helped them think of positive memories," explained Park. "As we shared stories, deeply buried memories would surface. Creating a story with voice, images and music also gave them an emotional legacy piece."

She added that people who have dementia are often scared of losing their ability to communicate.

"Another participant told me, 'One of my fears is, I went through dementia with my mother and it gets bad at the end. And that's all the memories I seem to have, is all the bad stuff.' She really appreciated this opportunity to create something positive that her family could have to remember her by."

Park and her team analyzed the participants' interviews about their experiences with this digital storytelling process. The results showed the impact was quite powerful in various ways. The participants thoroughly enjoyed the process of reminiscing and sharing stories, but were also astounded with what was possible when using technology and multimedia to present their stories.

The team found engaging individually with each participant was a critical part of making this process enjoyable.

Park said that meeting the participants in their homes was critical as it kept them in a familiar space, which is helpful for triggering memories.

"They were able to relax and open up more because it was just me working with them, and not a big group," said Park.

Jacques agreed. "I think it has been very enlightening for me. I think digital [storytelling](#) is a wonderful thing because I think there can be some help with Alzheimer's and that makes me excited because I think, 'yeah, that can help the next generation.'"

This study was published in *Human Aspects of IT for the Aged Population* in July 2017.

More information: Elly Park et al. Digital Storytelling and Dementia, *Human Aspects of IT for the Aged Population. Applications, Services and Contexts* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-58536-9_35](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58536-9_35)

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