

Online storytelling improved quality of life for people with dementia during COVID-19 lockdowns

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Credit: Pexels

Medical Humanities experts at the University of Surrey have offered important opportunities to safeguard the quality of life of people living with dementia in Medellín, Colombia, through a pioneering study of online therapeutic storytelling that lasted throughout the strict

COVID-19 lockdowns in the country.

The academics translated a storytelling method known as TimeSlips into Spanish for the first time and reworked it for delivery on Zoom when COVID-19 halted their research and face-to-face practice. Although this adaptation was an urgent response to the pandemic, the study's findings have ongoing relevance given the high levels of social isolation typically experienced by people living with dementia.

Participants in the study reported positive impacts on their mood and [energy levels](#), and on several cognitive functions, including observational abilities, concentration levels, motivation, and memory. There was also an increased appreciation of their own resilient capacities, which were also recognized by the participants' care partners. According to the study, this appreciation and recognition inspired tranquility, confidence and pride, which in turn led to greater motivation, participation and agency in the storytelling sessions.

Dr. Stephen Fay, lecturer in Spanish at the University of Surrey and principal investigator of the study said, "Throughout the study, participants expressed satisfaction, even modest pride in the resilient creative abilities that the platform enabled them to exercise. This was notable in one participant whose contributions to the stories were mostly monosyllabic until the fourth session and then underwent a marked increase in duration, fluency and enthusiasm."

In the study, trained facilitators provided weekly, one-hour storytelling sessions via Zoom, over 32 consecutive weeks to participants with dementia. Each session began with the on-screen sharing of a visual stimulus selected by the facilitators and an invitation to observe the image for a few moments in silence. The group [storytelling](#) process was then initiated with open questions, followed by a prompt of "Yes, and..." to elicit further creativity.

At the end of each session, participants were then asked to generate a title for the story. Despite their unfamiliarity with authoring their own stories, participants spoke positively of the experience of "making thoughts," "inventing a story," or being "carried into the imagination."

With 2.5 million people currently living with dementia in Latin America—a number that is predicted to rise by a staggering 180% by 2050—this study offers proven and accessible online methods to support these individuals and their families in their own homes.

The study has been published in *The Gerontologist*.

More information: Stephen M Fay et al, Creativity during COVID-19: Evaluating an online TimeSlips storytelling program for people living with dementia during quarantine in Colombia, *The Gerontologist* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnac191](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnac191)

Provided by University of Surrey

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