

Dementia is not the end of learning, finds researcher

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People with dementia can still learn new things, according to Elias Ingelbrand.
Credit: Jonas Roslund

People with dementia still have the ability to learn new things despite their illness. This is the conclusion of a doctoral thesis recently presented at Linköping University, Sweden. Its findings debunk the general belief that people with dementia are empty shells, according to Elias Ingebrand, who conducted the study.

Ingebrand let ten dementia sufferers, eight of whom lived in [care facilities](#), try using computer tablets for the first time in their lives. A staff member or a loved one was there for support, but the only instruction given to participants was to use the tablet as they wished. It soon turned out that the device made them curious.

"I was rather surprised at this. I may have expected that it would just lie there and that they would talk about something else, but we saw that they focused their attention on it," he says.

The study lasted for 4-6 weeks. Although the participants suffered from severe memory decline, they gradually learned to use the tablet more independently. The explanation, Ingebrand believes, is that the body remembers the movements required even though the ability to talk about it has been lost. But it is important to arouse the person's interest.

A woman who used to do orienteering spontaneously started using the tablet to check competition results. A man who used to be restless and aggressive learned how to navigate to the Open Archive of SVT, the Swedish public television broadcaster. After a while, staff noted that he would sit and watch for a long time, calmly and focused. This was a side of him they had never seen before.

Ingebrand was surprised to find that people with dementia could solve the mysteries of the [tablet](#) also without help from staff or loved ones, by collaborating and learning from each other. Also in this context, they managed to focus on the task at hand. As far as he knows, no one has

studied collaboration between [dementia sufferers](#) before.

There are however previous studies that have found that people with dementia have the ability to learn new things. This has involved remembering nonsense words or remembering the names of random people. But Ingebrand says that he has now shown that learning can take place even without any particular instructions, and that his results can also be immediately applied in [dementia care](#).

"My thesis has an impact on how we look at people with dementia. They are not to be treated as children, but as people who still have a will and an incentive to do things. This is ultimately about having the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities based on the person's own interests and desires," he explains.

This of course presents a challenge to care facility staff, who are often too busy to sit down with just one person for any length of time. Letting people with dementia do things in collaboration could be a solution worth trying. And even though this study is about computer tablets, Ingebrand believes that its results are valid also for other forms of learning.

"I want to take my research further by finding out how to make use of the knowledge and expertise of people with [dementia](#) in creating meaningful activities. Maybe someone could initiate an activity and teach others in the care facility. Perhaps a small seminar, or knitting. The right to lifelong [learning](#) should include everyone; the important thing is getting a chance to learn," he says.

More information: Elias Ingebrand, Dementia and learning: The use of tablet computers in joint activities, Doctoral thesis (2023). [DOI: 10.3384/9789180750714](https://doi.org/10.3384/9789180750714)

Provided by Linköping University

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