



Improving social engagement to stave off depression in older adults with cognitive decline



What was the focus of the research?

Developing a tailored social engagement intervention as a treatment manual for older adults with dementia and mild cognitive impairment.



Why was it important?

People living with cognitive impairment often experience loneliness and depression. They don't just find it hard to remember things, they also struggle talking to people because they have difficulty recognising emotions and staying engaged in conversations. As their condition worsens, their social network often becomes much smaller, putting them at increased risk of depression.

As depression is not only a side-effect of dementia, but also a potential cause of it, the decline in social cognitive skills and social engagement can cause a devastating self-feeding spiral of depression and further cognitive decline. Finding a way to help improve social cognitive skills in these people could really help to maintain or even improve their social and psychological health.



How did this happen?

Stage 1: recruited people with dementia or mild cognitive impairment and their care partners to form a co-design consumer reference group.

Stage 2: discussed with them the social and cognitive difficulties encountered by people with dementia and mild cognitive impairment. Over a series of meetings, their input was used to design, evaluate and refine an appropriate social cognition intervention, specifically for older people with cognitive impairments.

Stage 3: recruited three new groups of older Australians with mild cognitive impairment or early dementia to take part in a pilot. Conducted a trial of the social cognitive skills intervention and assessed if participants exhibited enhancement of emotion recognition, face identification, empathy, theory of mind, social disinhibition, social reasoning or memory for faces.



This is a world-first, comprehensive program to help older adults with cognitive impairment regain or build their social cognitive skills and connections with others. ”

– Dr Suraj Samtani



What were the results?

- Participants showed improvements in social cognition and memory.
- Participants experienced no deterioration in attention, verbal fluency, language or visual perception.
- The improvements in social cognition were maintained three months after the intervention had finished.



What will this mean for people with dementia?

- Improved social skills, wellbeing and mental health.
- The chance to reconnect with others and experience the joy of socialising once again.
- Increased participation in community life.



What will this mean for the future?

- Enough evidence for Dr Samtani's team to seek funding for a fully powered randomised controlled trial.
- A treatment manual for social intervention in older people with cognitive impairments.
- Training for health professionals to deliver the intervention.



What did the social cognitive skills intervention look like?

A set of focused, two-hour group sessions created especially for older Australians with cognitive decline. The groups ran weekly and each participant had personalised home tasks to complete between sessions.

A range of dementia-specific social skills were addressed such as, difficulties understanding verbal and non-verbal cues, remembering information in interactions, understanding sarcasm and jokes, making appropriate comments and conversational turn-taking.

There was a special focus on navigating real-world social interactions. At the end, participants were given the opportunity to exchange contact details if they wanted to continue to practice their skills post-intervention.



Who's undertaking the research?

Dr Suraj Samtani, University of New South Wales

Dr Samtani is a clinical psychologist and postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Healthy Brain Ageing. He has a PhD in Clinical Psychology and a Master of Psychology (Clinical) from the University of New South Wales. He has worked extensively in clinical practice, treating a wide range of conditions across the lifespan. He brings expert knowledge of

the social factors associated with dementia risk.

The title of Dr Samtani's research project is *A novel social cognition intervention for older adults with cognitive impairment: co-design and pilot study*.