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Prioritizing the relationship between the care professional and the care recipient: Person-centered care that is authentically person-centered

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Administrators and direct care providers across diverse delivery systems report numerous challenges as they attempt to operationalize person-centered care (PCC), which has become the benchmark for quality health care in the United States, as well as in many other countries. This presentation first reviews the theoretical and ethical basis for reframing PCC and then outlines some pragmatics for instituting a care model that prioritizes “being with,” rather than simply “caring for,” older persons. In making this shift, we propose a relationship focused model that can be incorporated into care provided by different disciplines (medicine, nursing, social work) for diverse populations (health condition, age group, mental status, including dementia, ethnicity). A framework for PCC that prioritizes the relationship between the care professional and the care recipient would fully incorporate the practice traditions in which it originated—namely, Carl Rogers’ client-centered psychotherapy and the dementia care pioneered by Thomas Kitwood. The Rogerian conditions that the caregiver is an empathic, congruent person who prizes the other in his or her care are best understood as attitudes to be held, not skills to be assembled and practiced. For many older persons, and particularly those with dementia, it is only when we prioritize our relationship with the person in our care over the evidence base for clinical interventions that what Kitwood calls one’s fundamental needs of “love, inclusion, attachment, comfort, identity, and occupation” can be met. Among the suggestions this presentation makes for the practice of relationship-centered care are: giving one’s full attention to the person, helping him or her access once important strengths that have been long forgotten or fallen out of use, respecting feelings and moods and demonstrating a willingness to talk about these, and practicing patience with the process of developing an ongoing relationship.

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