**Preserving the Self**

Cognitive decline is the hallmark characteristic of dementia that more or less gives way to an array of symptoms one with dementia could face. The care plan for a dementia patient is unique to their personality, environment, and many other social, environmental and financial factors. When it comes to caring for a person living with dementia, the most important aspect is preserving the self. Preserving the self means to maintain the best sense of normality as possible, without compromising the quality of the care received. The biggest challenge the family of a person with dementia faces is deciding how best to “preserve the self” of their loved one. They must decide whether they will provide in-home care from a family member or from a home health nurse, or if they are going to move their loved one into a facility like a memory care unit, assisted living home, or nursing home.

I spoke with a well accomplished researcher in the field of gerontology and human and environmental sciences, Dr. Emily Roberts. Dr. Roberts is a professor in the College of Human Sciences at Oklahoma State University, and is specifically prominent in the Design, Housing and Merchandising sector. Dr. Roberts broadly focuses her research on the caregiving and the environment of those living with dementia. When asked about the options of care for a dementia patient, she stated how keeping the patient in their home environment, or with as little change as possible is most ideal for preserving the patient’s self. While we could all agree with her that staying in a home filled with memories, routine, and familiarity helps preserve one’s self, we can’t ignore the challenges that come with giving care to a person with dementia in their home setting. The caregivers have an enormous burden to bear helping to maintain the patient’s expectation of everyday life.

Dr. Roberts described some exciting research she is involved in with Dr. Fan, a colleague from the College of Engineering, that could potentially be game-changing in the way a person living with dementia is cared for. Dr. Roberts and her team is working to develop a cognitive assistive device to help people living with dementia in their everyday lives. There has been a good amount of studies in the area of assistive technology for cognition, and Dr. Roberts’ and Dr. Fan’s work hopes to expand on the research already conducted. This cognitive assistive device is designed to fit into the user’s life at a relatively subconscious level-glasses.

When a person with glasses wakes up in the morning, it is a subconscious decision to put on their glasses, the same as tying a shoe or driving to work. However, these glasses would be no ordinary glasses, but have the ability to see the user’s life from a first-person point of view. The device would be programmed with the knowledge of the user’s home layout, how to perform everyday tasks (like brushing your teeth or making coffee), and with the ability to recognize when the user needs their assistance to step through these tasks. If this device is developed as intended, it would remove a huge weight of responsibility from a caregiver’s shoulders. The caregiver wouldn’t have to remind the user of how to navigate their home or how to perform simple, everyday tasks. This would be a win-win situation for a dementia patient. They would be able to independently navigate the world around them and perform daily tasks that contribute largely to preserving one’s sense of self. While it doesn’t end the work to find new technology and strategies to better care for the geriatric population, cognitive assistive devices could put us one step closer to accomplishing what matters- preserving the self.

**References**

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