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Understanding Dementia and Adapting for Positive Outcomes: Caregiver Support Series

Sponsored by Appalachian State University and
Appalachian Institute for Health and Wellness

Fall 2026 Series Description

As the number of people living with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias continues to grow, family members provide the majority of care—often at home and in the community, and often for many years. Here in the High Country, families frequently support loved ones with dementia for a decade or longer. As experienced caregivers often say, *"Our situations are always changing."*

Dementia caregiving can feel like ongoing detective work. Recognizing subtle changes, responding to new challenges, and continually adjusting to a "new normal" can be exhausting—even for the most adaptive families. At Appalachian State University and the Appalachian Institute for Health and Wellness, we're here to help.

This six-part educational series is designed to support family caregivers as they learn to understand dementia-related changes and adapt care across the disease progression. Facilitated by **Dr. Heather McKay, Occupational Therapist and Dementia Care Specialist**, the series blends practical education with collaborative problem-solving. Caregivers will learn not only *what* is changing, but *why*—and how to translate that understanding into real-world strategies that fit their own situations.

With guidance from a dementia care expert and support from one another, families can continue providing the **right care at the right time**—improving quality of life for everyone involved, at every stage of the journey.

Series Logistics

This is a six-part educational series, offered every Spring and Fall, with sessions held every other week.

Time: 9:00–10:30 am
Location: Appalachian Institute for Health and Wellness
Leon Levine Hall (First Floor)
1179 State Farm Road, Suite 132

Care for the Whole Family

Families are encouraged to attend together.

While caregivers participate in the educational sessions, **engaging, supportive activities** are offered for their partners living with dementia in a nearby space. These activities are facilitated by **Mary Strong, LCSW**, along with students from Appalachian State University's **Department of Social Work**.

This parallel programming allows caregivers to focus on learning while their loved ones enjoy meaningful social connection in a safe, welcoming environment.

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Fall 2026 Session Schedule & Topics

Tuesday September 8 **9:00 – 10:30am**	**What's Dementia and What's Not?**
This opening session builds a clear foundation for understanding Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia. We'll demystify the diagnostic process and distinguish between normal age-related changes and true red flags. Caregivers will learn what to take seriously, what to let go of, and how early understanding can reduce worry while supporting timely action.	
Tuesday September 22 **9:00 – 10:30am**	**Recognizing Changes Associated with Dementia**
In Session 2, we connect predictable brain changes to everyday challenges caregivers encounter at home and in the community. With a focus on **preserved strengths—not just losses**—caregivers will learn why behavioral symptoms occur, how to trace challenges back to their root causes, and how to create practical solutions that support meaningful daily activities and shared routines.	
Tuesday October 6 **9:00 – 10:30am**	**Communicating When Words Don't Work—It Starts With Your Approach**
Dementia is notorious for communication breakdowns—but effective communication is about more than words. This session focuses on *how* we approach interactions, not just *what* we say. Caregivers will learn nonverbal strategies—including the **Positive Physical Approach (PPA)**—that help start interactions on the right foot. We'll add practical, ready-to-try communication tips that improve participation and reduce frustration during social visits and shared activities. Real-life stories will bring these strategies to life.	
Tuesday October 20 **9:00 – 10:30am**	**Easing Distress and Other Challenging Behavioral Symptoms of Dementia**
This session introduces strategies for supporting individuals with dementia during moments of distress. When logic and explanations fall flat, caregivers need different tools. Through real stories, video examples, and group discussion, participants will analyze what works in real situations and leave with practical "pro tips" they can try right away at home.	
Tuesday November 3 **9:00 – 10:30am**	**Adapting Along the Timeline of Dementia: Early and Middle Stages**
Dementia care changes over time—and what worked yesterday may not work today. This session introduces a five-stage framework that helps caregivers recognize key "road signs" along the dementia timeline. With attention to preserved abilities at each stage, caregivers will learn how to adjust the type and amount of support they offer during the early and middle stages to foster safety, participation, and more positive relationships.	
Tuesday November 17 **9:00 – 10:30am**	**The Right Care at the Right Time in Late-Stage Dementia and Maintaining Your Own Brain**
The final session focuses on late-stage dementia and matching care to evolving needs with compassion and confidence. Drawing on years of experience in palliative care and hospice, Dr. McKay will share practical communication strategies and safe hands-on approaches used by families and professionals alike. The series concludes with evidence-informed strategies for **maintaining your own brain health**, highlighting essential components of brain wellbeing and adaptable "brain exercises" for caregivers at any age.	

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Speaker Bio

Dr. Heather McKay, PhD, OTR/L, BCG, FAOTA is an occupational therapist, dementia care specialist, and nationally recognized educator on dementia care and caregiver support. She currently serves as an Assistant Professor in the Occupational Therapy Program at Appalachian State University in the Beaver College of Health Sciences.

Dr. McKay earned her master's degree in occupational therapy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and her PhD in occupational therapy from Texas Woman's University. She brings over two decades of experience across hospital, home health, community, hospice, and palliative care settings.

A recognized trainer for the Alzheimer's Association, Dr. McKay is a member of Dementia Care Professionals of America and a PAC Certified Dementia Care Consultant. In 2016, the Alzheimer's Foundation of America named her **Dementia Care Professional of the Year** in recognition of her dedication to individuals living with dementia, their families, and the professionals who support them.

Through her work with **Partnerships for Health**, Dr. McKay provides consultation and workforce development for organizations nationwide. Her collaborative projects include national partners such as the National Association of State Veterans Homes and the Armed Forces Veterans' Homes Foundation. She also co-produced the award-winning caregiver training video series *Dementia Care for America's Heroes*, which received the national **Caregiver Friendly Award**.

In addition to her professional expertise, Dr. McKay brings personal experience with dementia caregiving. She welcomes caregivers and professionals alike and is known for translating complex information into practical, compassionate strategies families can use and customize for their own lives.

Learn more about Heather and her work through the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences at Appalachian State University.