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Research News

Volunteers Needed For Study of Memory and Dementia

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Contact:

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PULLMAN, Wash. □ Volunteers are needed for a new study of memory loss that is getting under way at Washington State University.

The researchers hope to enroll 100 volunteers who are not experiencing memory problems, 50 who are experiencing mild memory problems, and 50 who have been diagnosed with a progressive memory disorder such as Alzheimer's disease. Participants must be age 50 or older, fluent in English and have no history of significant brain injury, stroke or disease other than the possible dementia that would be a

subject of the study. Individuals who have participated in other studies with the researchers are welcome to join this study.

To volunteer or to find out more about the study, call 509-335-4033, extension 2, and leave your name and phone number. A member of the Memory in Older Adulthood and Dementia Research Program will call you back.

Psychologist Maureen Schmitter-Edgecombe, co-leader of the study, said the project aims to develop better ways of identifying and measuring the specific, real-life problems faced by people with memory loss.

"We're interested in issues of ecological validity and how well what we're doing in the laboratory reflects what's happening in the everyday environment," she said. "To develop the best therapies and rehabilitation methods, we need to better understand how memory and other cognitive difficulties affect everyday living."

Schmitter-Edgecombe said volunteers will first undergo a 30 to 40 minute phone interview to determine their suitability for the study. Those selected will participate in two sessions that last from two and a half to three hours each. The sessions will include "brain teaser" type tests, surveys about the volunteer's memory and problem-solving abilities, and performance of everyday activities such as cooking oatmeal, placing and receiving phone calls and changing a light bulb. The study will be conducted primarily at the Pullman campus, although one session may be held at WSU Spokane.

In addition to the satisfaction of knowing they have contributed to a better understanding of memory disorders, participants will receive the results of the standardized tests they did during the study. Such information could be helpful to their physicians in providing medical care or other assistance. Schmitter-Edgecombe stressed that the study will not provide diagnoses of medical conditions such as Alzheimer's disease. That must be done by an individual's physician.

The study is funded by a grant from the state's Life Sciences Discovery Fund. Schmitter-Edgecombe has done extensive work developing strategies to help people with dementia and their significant others cope with the loss of memory and cognitive function. Her collaborator on this project, engineer Diane Cook, is designing "smart" apartments equipped with sensors that monitor the resident's activities and provide reminders to do such things as take medication at a specific time or turn off the stove. The everyday activities part of the study will take place in a smart apartment.

"We'll be using the smart home to model these activities so we can better design interventions" to help people with different degrees of memory loss, said Schmitter-Edgecombe. Ideally, the interventions they devise will allow people with memory loss to perform everyday activities well enough to continue to live independently.

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