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## **U of L researcher to explore safe and healthy sexual expression for long-term care residents living with dementia**

Dr. Julia Brassolotto, a Faculty of Health Sciences professor at the University of Lethbridge, and co-investigators, Drs. Pia Kontos and Alisa Grigorovich from the University of Toronto, are looking to develop and evaluate a toolkit that can be used in long-term care settings to support healthy and safe sexual expression for people with dementia.



“For many residents with dementia, intimate relationships can be really grounding,” says Brassolotto. “There’s a lot of benefit, emotionally, physically and mentally, for residents to still engage in some form of intimacy, especially when they’ve lost a lot of other social roles and activities and are living in continuing care.”

With a \$325,000 grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the researchers will study two long-term care

homes, one in urban Ontario and one in rural Alberta. In the first phase, the researchers will use demographic questionnaires, observations, interviews and document analysis to understand current practices. The interviews, either virtually or when safe to do in person, include persons living with dementia and their family members, care providers, managers and professional consultants. The second phase of the study involves developing and evaluating a digital arts-informed toolkit to help individuals and organizations support sexual expression.

While sexual expression has many benefits for older adults, such as improved quality of life and mental health, people with dementia living in long-term care face many barriers. These barriers can include a lack of privacy, attitudes of staff and family, community dynamics, and the need to balance autonomy and protection from harm.

Not much is available to help educate, prepare or train staff, so they typically improvise to the best of their abilities, but practices can vary within a care team or from one long-term care home to another. The situations they encounter can also vary widely. Sometimes people with

dementia may become more sexually disinhibited and express interest towards staff or residents who are uninterested or their behaviour may signal something else.

“We never suggest care staff or other residents should have to be accepting of unwanted expressions,” she says. “With related training, toolkits and policies in place, care staff will be better prepared and equipped to navigate sexual expression. Our goal is to help support this component of people’s lives that feels very human and connected and gives them joy and pleasure, while also being very careful to make sure it’s safe, that interactions are wanted and that people aren’t getting harmed.”

This news release can also be found on [UNews](#).

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