

# Enabling Approach

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The *Enabling Approach* is a modality of interpersonal relationship based on the recognition of the interlocutor's *Basic Abilities*. The goal is a *Happy-enough Coexistence* between the speakers.

In geriatrics the *Enabling Approach* is a professional intervention that seeks to create an enabling environment in the location where frail elderly people live, with or without dementia.

In this environment they can exercise their *Basic Abilities*, especially the *Speech Ability*, as they are able to do - as they actually do - without feeling in error, and with the only aim of being happy in doing what they are doing.

The goal is to create the conditions for a *Happy-enough Coexistence* between elderly people, operators and family members.

## Origin and intersections

The *Enabling Approach* was introduced in the early 2000s by Pietro Vigorelli and has spread through multi-disciplinary seminars and training courses organized by Anchise Group in Milan and across Italy. From the methodological point of view, the *Enabling Approach* is derived from direct experience in assisting people and from the study of verbal exchanges between elderly people and operators, which were recorded and carefully transcribed. The *Enabling Approach* has its roots in the concept of Therapeutic Alliance and is derived from Giampaolo Lai's method called "Conversazionalismo". It intersects with contributions of other authors: Naomi Feil with "Validation"; Carl Rogers, Tom Kitwood and The Bradford Dementia Group with "Person centered care"; Moyra Jones with "Gentlecare"; John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth with "Attachment Theory", Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen with "Capability Approach".

## Basic Abilities

Within the *Enabling Approach*, there are five *Basic Abilities*:

- *Speech Ability*, which refers to producing and exchanging words, regardless of their meaning;
- *Communicating Ability*, by means of verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal language;
- *Emotional Ability*, which refers to having, expressing and sharing emotions, and recognizing those of the interlocutor;
- *Negotiating Ability*, which means working towards agreements or compromises through speaking (an expression of this ability is observed in the negotiation of the narrative theme during verbal exchanges);
- *Deciding Ability*, referring to daily choices even when cognitive deficits are present and in contexts where freedom of decision-making is much reduced (extreme expressions of this ability are represented by oppositional behaviors, relational closure and isolation from the world).

Anchise Group proposes the *Enabling Approach* in the care of older people, wherever they live, both in the presence or absence of cognitive deficits (including all types of dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease). When an enabling environment is created, elderly people feel allowed to perform activities which they are capable of doing, in their own way, without feeling in error. The only purpose is to be as happy as possible, in doing what they are doing, in their own way, in the particular context in which they are.

## Key concepts

The key concepts forming the foundation of the *Enabling Approach* are the *Recognition of Basic Abilities*, the *Recognition of Multiple Identities* (frail old people and people with dementia are not only people in need of assistance; in every person there are several stratified identities), the

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*Recognition of Possible Worlds* (the *World of Before* and the *World of After*, the *World of Here* and the *World of There*) and the *Recognition* of the point of view and value system of frail elderly people, both with or without dementia.

## **Recognition of Basic Abilities**

The *Recognition of Basic Abilities* is a complex activity which consists of:

- *Focusing attention* on each *Basic Ability* in the moment in which it appears, as it appears;
- *Identifying*, which means understanding and naming the *Basic Ability* that appears;
- *Accepting* that frail elderly people say what they say, express what they express, without interrupting or correcting them;
- *Facilitating* the appearance of *Basic Abilities* without judging them (*Basic Abilities* should not be judged as right or wrong);
- *Giving Effectiveness*, which means seriously considering what the speaker is expressing and, if appropriate, passing from words to action.

## **Tools and settings**

The *Enabling Approach* focuses attention on verbal exchanges between the speakers; the tools are listening and words. An operator employing the *Enabling Approach* would capture the *Basic Abilities* of the interlocutor as they occur and how they occur, and with their own verbal intervention they would give *Recognition* of these abilities. Verbal interventions of the operator (such as *Don't ask questions*, *Don't interrupt*, *Don't correct*, *Don't complete sentences*, *Listening*, *Respecting the silence and the slowness*, *Accompanying with the words*, *Giving back the narrative theme*, *Echoing response*, *Supplying fragments of autobiography*, *Recognizing the emotions*, *Looking for a Happy Meeting Point (HMP)*, etc.) are inspired by *Conversational Techniques*. To create an enabling environment, it is possible to use the *Enabling Approach* in both specific and non-specific settings.

Specific settings include:

- *Welcome Conversations*, when elderly people enter assisted living locations;
- *Individual Recognition Therapy*, based on the *Enabling Approach*;
- *Recognition Groups*, which are conversation groups for people with dementia;
- *ABC Groups*, which are groups for relatives of people with dementia directed by a therapist;
- training courses for operators.

Non-specific settings include:

- all professional activities (such as nursing, medical, recreational and rehabilitation activities),
- informal meetings of everyday life.

Therefore, this approach can be adopted by all caregivers (both operators and family members), with all frail elderly people, in every context, 24 hours a day.

In this way *Enabling Approach* can become *like the air which people breathe*.

## **Bibliography**

1. Vigorelli P. (2010): *The ABC Group for caregivers of persons living with dementia: self-help based on the Conversational and Enabling Approach*. Non-pharmacological therapies in dementia. 3. 271-286.
2. Vigorelli P. (2011): *L'Approccio Capacitante. Come prendersi cura degli anziani fragili e delle persone malate di Alzheimer*. Franco Angeli, Milano.
3. [www.gruppoanchise.it](http://www.gruppoanchise.it)