Memory Cafe program to offer ‘field trips’ for those with dementia, their care partners

Building on the success of Sonoma’s Memory Cafes, which provide engaging activities for those living with dementia and their care partners, a new cafe program launching in August will enable them to have stimulating experiences in the greater community.

Wayne Mehl, who has dementia, and wife Helen Mehl decorate cookies and tissue paper flower art during a Memory Cafe event at Sonoma United Methodist Church (left photo). They show the paintings they created during another Memory Cafe event (right photo). A new addition to the cafe program, Memory Cafe Adventures, will offer participants opportunities to attend “field trips” and engage with others in Sonoma County. (CarePartners Initiative)

DANIEL JOHNSON
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Building on the success of Memory Cafes — held twice each month at Sonoma United Methodist Church to provide engaging activities for those living with dementia and their care partners — a new café program will be launched in August that will enable them to have stimulating experiences in the greater community.

Memory Cafe Adventures will debut on Thursday, Aug. 21, with a "field trip" to Sonoma Community Center. They will be offered on the third Thursday of each month from 10 a.m. to noon at various places in Sonoma County. As with the other Memory Cafes, everyone in the community who has memory loss and their caregiver — or friend or loved one — is invited to attend.

"We will meet at the Sonoma Community Center for a tour led by a staff member to learn about all its offerings and then one of the employed artists there will lead us in making clay pots," said Heidi Lage, director of programs at the CarePartners Initiative, which offers the Memory Cafe programs. "Vanessa Roglien (executive director of the center) has been incredibly welcoming and immediately open to the idea of a collaboration with us."

The center's development director, Mary Catherine Cutcliffe, is pleased that it will be the inaugural location for the Memory Cafe Adventures program.

"We are delighted," she said. "Bringing the community together is what we do at the center. "'Community' is our middle name and the heart of what we do."

At the second Memory Cafe Adventures event, to be held at Sebastiani Theatre on Sept. 18, participants will watch an old movie that is familiar to them. At the March 19, 2026, gathering, participants will meet at Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, where a staff member will guide them through the exhibits and lead them in an art activity.

"I have been so touched at how welcoming our Sonoma Valley community businesses and organizations have been to our Memory Cafe Adventures program," said Lage, a licensed marriage and family therapist with a private practice in Sonoma as well as a member of the CarePartners Initiative's board. "However, I know how amazing our community is, so I am also not surprised."

She said that the new program, which was created in response to participants' requests, has the same goal as the regular Memory Cafe program.

"It is to reduce isolation for those living with dementia and their care partner through a casual community meeting, which includes creative activities, conversation and connection," she said. "The difference is that the location will change, so we will have a wider variety of activities to choose from."

Memory Cafe Adventures will also enable those with dementia to have an engaging, interactive experience out in the community in which they can feel comfortable and welcomed.

"In addition, the care partners will be able to get out of the house and enjoy an engaging activity with their loved one," Lage said.

She said that caregiving can be a monotonous grind of assisting loved ones' daily activities, routines and medications.

"Memory Cafe Adventures will provide an event to look forward to that is positive," she said. "Many care partners have shared that their days with their loved one is always better after Memory Cafe days. Their loved one might not even remember that they attended it in the morning, but their mood is elevated for the rest of the day, which helps everyone."

Also, during the cafes, care partners can meet and build friendships with other care partners who understand their experiences and challenges as well as share resources and ideas.

Lage said that organizing Memory Cafe Adventures outings will present some new challenges.

The locations of the gatherings need to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, because some participants will use wheelchairs or walkers.

"In addition, I have to keep in mind the weather," she said. "I am only planning outdoor activities during months when I can most likely predict that it won't be too hot, cold or rainy."

Memory Cafe Adventures outings, like regular Memory Cafe events, are free, although donations will be welcomed and accepted.

Attendees can come late or attend only a portion of each event. Although no RSVPs are required for the regular Memory Cafe gatherings, they will be needed for Memory Cafe Adventures events. People who participate in them can also attend the regular cafes.

The regular Memory Cafe gatherings will continue from 10 a.m. on noon on the second and fourth Monday of every month at Sonoma United Methodist Church. Initially attracting 10 to 12 people when they began in November 2023, they now draw an average of 16 to 18 people, and in May 2025, had 24 people at an event.

“Keep in mind that in 2024 alone, six members of our cafe passed away,” Lage said. “So, even though we lost them, our numbers have continued to grow with new members. We are continually trying to get the word out about the cafes to the community.”

Memory Cafe activities include crafts, games, singing, flower arranging, chair yoga,da ncing, visits from comfort animals, show and tell, poetry and history presentations.

Some of the care partners said these and other activities have provided a welcome boost to them and their loved ones with dementia.

“We enjoy the Memory Cafes,” said Helen Mehl, whose husband, Wayne Mehl, is living with dementia. “Wayne laughs there more than at any other place. The staff is excellent and very creative, and each person has a warm, welcoming spirit.”

Care partner Molly Wymore, who attends Memory Cafes with son-in-law Paul Cameron, said, “Paul looks forward to visiting Memory Cafes every month. He checks the calendar to make sure he doesn’t miss one. At each session, he is excited to participate in the exercises and wants to be sure to be involved in the craft program.”

She said that Cameron has made some good friends at the cafes, and that the socialization has been very beneficial to his mood and energy.

Another care partner, Tracey Green, said she and her husband, John Green, appreciate the community spirit that Lage and her staff have created at the cafes.

"The laughter and kindness enrich our lives," she said. "Cognitive issues bring major life changes, but somehow we all forget this at Memory Cafes. John's memory is very poor, but once we pull into the church parking lot, he knows fun is coming!"

The CarePartners Initiative hopes to continue expanding its Memory Cafe programs, but it will need additional funding to do so.

"All our programs are run on donations and very small grants," Lage said. 'We are always looking for ways to increase our funding to continue our programming and offer more programs. In the future, with more funding we would like to offer a support group for people who are newly diagnosed with dementia. We would also like to offer a grief support group for those who have lost their loved one to dementia."

She hopes that these and other Memory Cafe programs will also raise awareness of the disease and those affected by it.

"There is so much stigma around dementia that many people with it just retreat into their homes and only venture out for doctor appointments," Lage said. "But people living with dementia can still lead rich, fulfilling lives. Our participants are lovely, engaging individuals who have so much to offer."

Reach the reporter, Dan Johnson, at daniel.johnson@sonomanews.com

Memory Café Adventures

- Memory Cafe Adventures will start on Aug. 21 at the Sonoma Community Center.
- This program allows individuals with dementia and their caregivers to engage in community field trips and creative activities.
- Offerings will include a variety of monthly outings, such as tours and art activities focused on reducing isolation.
- The initiative aims to enhance social connection, mood, and provide enjoyable experiences for participants.
- The program continues looking for funding to expand its offerings and support those affected by dementia.