



Activities for People with Dementia and their Carers

Activities are everything that we do in a day. Activities make up a day. They give us a sense of purpose and help provide meaning to our lives. Activities can promote a sense of self, confidence and mastery over our environment. A lack of activities that provide meaning and purpose, can result in boredom, depression, apathy and accelerate the progression of dementia symptoms.

The symptoms related to dementia can impact on our capacity to independently perform many activities. As the dementia symptoms progress, individuals will need more assistance actively engaging in everyday life. It's important to note that people with dementia can still actively participate in life and in everyday activities, throughout the disease progression.

Carers will need to take on a greater role in helping to facilitate active participation. Some carers respond by doing everything for the person with dementia which can decrease the person's independence and increase their need for help. Conversely, some carers subscribe to the 'use it or lose it' philosophy which can create confusion and distress. Both approaches contribute to significant behavioural disturbances and destroy the self-esteem of the person with dementia.

The best way to keep the mind and body active is to focus on activities that help maintain existing skills for as long as possible. Work with remaining strengths and minimise weaknesses, plan activities to provide the 'right amount of challenge' and provide 'just the right amount of assistance'.

Guiding Principles

- Activities need to be age and gender specific. To give an 80 year old man a doll to hold and 'care' for, is inappropriate.
- Base the choice of activities on past likes and lifestyle. The skills for these types of activities are deeply embedded in the mind and last long into the illness.
- All activities need to be meaningful for the person with dementia.

Considerations

1. A degree of assistance or supervision is likely to be needed and plenty of time allocated. This requires patience and flexibility on the part of the carer.
2. Focus should be on the interaction, fun and enjoyment, not task completion. And if the flowers are pulled out instead of the weeds, life goes on!
3. Repetition of a liked activity gives a sense of comfort, security and worthiness to an individual. For example, sweeping the garden path for several hours each day may seem boring to the carer or onlooker, but gives the person with dementia a sense of purpose.
4. Create that 'just right challenge.' We need to understand that everyone is different.

Try the following

Encourage independence by stepping back and letting the person with dementia do what they can themselves – then step in only when needed. Appropriate positive reinforcement may be

needed on completion to help that person know that they have completed the task successfully.

Personal grooming activities: Going to the hair dresser, having a manicure or pedicure or applying makeup. It is important for a person's self-esteem to maintain normal patterns of behaviour and routine. All these things are activities which can give meaning and satisfaction to a person's life. Of special note is cleanliness and dental care. If problems are encountered with these activities, enlist the aid of community nurses, your doctor or dentist.

Exercise: It is not only important for maintaining health and fitness, it also helps people sleep better at night. Walking is cheap and suitable for most fitness levels. A walk in the fresh air each day provides a change of scene and topics to talk about. Other options may include dancing or playing tennis or lawn bowls.

Sports: Golf, fishing, camping, even going to the races, are all examples of the types of things people with dementia are still capable of doing so.

House and garden work: Do not worry how long it takes. The person may help to dust, sweep, make beds, do the washing, folding clothes, sweeping, weeding etc. By completing these task the person has a sense of purpose and are able to be engaged.

Outings: Go to the shops, drive to the beach and enjoy some fish and chips are just some simple ways of getting out and about within the community. Try and maintain the person's previous roles. (e.g. the man cooks the meat).

Pets: Pets are an important part of many people's life. Not only are they good companions but helping with their care can give the person a sense of usefulness, worth and responsibility.

Listening to music: Music is a powerful tool which can quickly alter moods and emotion. Tape the person's favourite music and songs to which they can listen and sing along to. Try it in particularly difficult times or to avoid them.

TV/reading: CDs of old favourite movies or tapes of favourite radio programs are available. Caution must be exercised with TV viewing—the person may have difficulty separating TV images from reality and this could cause great distress. Likewise too much noise from radio and TV can create confusion and agitation in the person with dementia. If your routine involved reading the daily papers or magazines, then continue to do so. Even if the person can no longer read, enjoyment can still be obtained from looking at the photos and illustrations.

Special and significant occasions: Weddings, christenings, family gatherings, vacations—with care and forward planning these can and should still be enjoyed by all.

Make a 'life story' book: Gather old photos, letters and other memorabilia that reflect the significant and special events in the life of the person with dementia. This can be used to stimulate past memories and reaffirm the worth of a person.

Allow the person the dignity of risk: Cutting food, pouring tea, stirring in the sugar are basic skills which remain for long periods. Rarely are these tasks any more dangerous for the person with dementia than for the carer.

Involve the person in the decision making process: What is it that they want to wear, do etc.?

Where possible, let the person choose activities that they would normally be doing, which they enjoy, and which has relevance and meaning in their life. Activities should provide just the right amount of challenge to encourage self-confidence and mastery over oneself and the environment. The greater goal of activities for dementia is to enhance mood and self-confidence, rather than perfecting the end result.

**For more information or to access services
please contact the Speech Pathology
department at Alzheimer's Queensland on
1800 639 331**