



Engaging in Activities At Home

For People Living with Dementia



Alzheimer National Helpline

1800 341 341

The Importance of Activities

When considering activities for people with dementia it is important to define what we mean by activities. Activities take many forms and represent different facets of our lives. Although special events and recreational activities are enjoyable and important, it is our day-to-day activities that define us, enhance our self-esteem and give purpose to our lives.

Activities provide a structure for the daily lives of people with dementia but they need help organising their days. Activities enable them to retain their life skills and learn some new ones. Activities done with another person in the home or with others in a day care centre provide opportunities for social interaction.

By providing an outlet for energy and occupation, activities may help lessen behaviour caused by anxiety or boredom.

If we think of activities only as outings, visits, or hobbies, we can overlook the importance of ensuring that people with dementia experience meaningful occupation as part of their everyday lives.

Organising Activities

To ensure activities are suited to a person with dementia the following should be considered:

The Person

What are the person's likes and dislikes, abilities, and past interests? Is the person able to initiate activities independently? Is the person physically able to do an activity? Does the person have sight, hearing, or perceptual problems that might significantly affect his/her capacity to undertake an activity? Over time dementia does affect a person's confidence, intellect, memory, ability to think logically, and the ability to understand and process language.

The Activity

It is important to make activities for the person with dementia part of the daily routine. The person with dementia can do a variety of tasks (see List of Household Tasks). **It does not matter if the task is not completed properly!** If the table is not fully set or the towels are not folded neatly, adjustments can be made discreetly later. As **dementia progresses it may be necessary to change the tasks to more simple repetitive ones.** A successful 'activity' may last only a few minutes depending on the stage of dementia. A few minutes spent at a pleasurable or useful activity can bring satisfaction and help the person's self-esteem.

What matters is that the person with dementia feels a sense of inclusion in the tasks being done.

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Family/Carer Input

A family member, friend or even a carer has an important role in prompting the person to do an activity. He/she can break an activity in to small manageable parts, assist with difficult parts of a task, and offer encouragement. A person with dementia may respond positively if a specific request for help is made- “Would you please stir this for me?” or “Please sweep the floor” (while handing a brush to the person). If somebody shares an activity with the person with dementia, it provides an opportunity for social contact and conversation. Some activities provide opportunities for moderate exercise e.g. standing up to dry dishes, sweeping the floor, or sweeping the path.

Your approach needs to be flexible and realistic using prompting and encouragement rather than criticism and correction.

The Environment

A person with dementia may become uncomfortable, frightened, or confused by the environment if it is too hot or too cold, is noisy, or if there are too many people around. A person with dementia may be distracted by excessive background noise from a radio or TV.

Ensure the person with dementia uses materials that are safe, e.g. non-toxic paints, and avoid sharp tools. The environment can be used to stimulate activities. Indoors, items such as photo albums, old magazines, cards, and household items can be used for activities. Outdoors, light gardening and bird tables can generate activities.

General Home Tasks

General household tasks can provide a variety of activities for the person with dementia. The person may have previously enjoyed doing household tasks and may feel useful if encouraged to do some simple ones. The person might not previously have participated in household tasks, or might not have enjoyed them, but would enjoy tasks like watering plants, arranging flowers or feeding pets or birds.

Adapting Tasks

It is important to think creatively and adapt the task to fit the ability level of the person.

- Some people with dementia would be unable to use an electric vacuum cleaner but might find it easy to use a lightweight carpet sweeper.
- Some tasks, which are usually done standing up e.g. drying dishes, might be done sitting down.

Avoid giving too much supervision and direction. If the person is criticised and corrected he/she may become reluctant to engage in the activity again. If the floor has to be swept again it can be done later to avoid drawing attention to a task that has not been done properly. Some tasks such as washing and

drying dishes or folding sheets can be joint activities and can promote conversation and social contact.

People with dementia can miss the experience of sharing activities with their families or feeling useful.

List of Possible Tasks

- Cleaning a window (water and wiper)
- Re-organising food cupboard
- Hand washing small items e.g. socks
- Setting/ Clearing the table
- Hanging out the washing
- Washing/drying dishes
- Folding sheets/towels (with help)
- Tidying drawers
- Sorting/matching socks
- Arranging flowers
- Dusting
- Watering plants/window boxes
- Sweeping/Mopping floor
- Feeding pets

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- 👁 Using a hand held Hoover
- 👁 Stocking a bird table
- 👁 Polishing brass or silver
- 👁 Making a shopping list

It is important to focus on the benefit of exercise and occupation to the person and the sense of achievement and inclusion that the person can derive from participating in a household activity even if the person can do the task for **only a few minutes a few times a day**.

Different kinds of Activities:

People with dementia participate in routine activities of personal care and eating and drinking but many may not have the opportunity of helping with household tasks, or undertaking intellectual, spiritual, or creative activities.

Importance of exercise suited to the person

Many people do not have the opportunity of taking enough exercise. If they spend too much time sitting, dozing, or watching television all day it may cause them to be restless and wakeful at night.

If there are problems with mobility, exercises in a chair to music suited to that person can be an enjoyable experience.

Walking can include discussion about the surrounding countryside or area, people or animals encountered along the way. Even walking around the garden is an opportunity for gentle exercise while engaging in conversation about flowers, plants etc.

Although most people do well with a routine, if possible new activities should occasionally be tried and activities varied from day to day according to the mood and interest of the person and the weather and season.

Daily Routines

Personal Care Activities: bathing, showering, shaving and dressing

Mealtimes Activities: preparing food, cooking, eating and drinking

Household Tasks: dusting, sweeping, cleaning worktops, washing or sorting socks or folding towels.

Other types of Activities

Physical: taking a walk, dancing, light gardening

Social: having tea/coffee, attending a family gathering, talking or playing cards or bingo, reminiscing with friend or neighbour

Intellectual: reading a book or magazine or doing a crossword puzzle

Spiritual: praying, listening to religious service, singing a hymn

Creative: painting, using pottery clay, playing musical instrument, creating a Life Story Book with family help

Relaxing: resting, looking out the window, petting an animal, having a foot bath or hand massage

Spontaneous: going on a picnic or visiting friends

Television

People with dementia will enjoy some Radio and Television programmes, particularly in the early stages of the condition. Favourite programmes of music, nature, sport, and cookery programmes can be recorded and shown repeatedly. It is important to remember that a person with dementia may increasingly struggle to follow the story lines of many of the 'soap operas' or news documentaries, so these may become difficult to watch rather than enjoyable over time.

At a certain stage some people with dementia may lose their ability to recognise familiar objects and may develop perceptual problems. They may become frightened, confused and disturbed by violent or noisy programmes.



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Apps for people with dementia & carers

There is a range of apps available to help people with dementia live more independently which can be used on a tablet or a mobile phone device, including apps on reminiscence, brain training, puzzles, medicine reminder apps, apps that alert a carer if the user falls or wanders as well as reminder apps that alert you to complete or undertake a task. Below are some app suggestions:

- 👉 **My House of Memories** - The app allows you to explore objects from the past and share memories together.
- 👉 **IFI (Irish Film Institute) Player** - You can browse through over 100 years of short films, newsreels, animations and documentaries.
- 👉 **Hello Brain Health** - Trinity Dublin developed an app to challenge the brain in the major areas: physical, social, mental, attitude and lifestyle.
- 👉 **Jointly** - the app is designed to make caring a little easier, less stressful and a lot more organised.

For more information on suitable apps for you or your loved one contact the National Helpline on 1800 341 341 or visit www.alzheimer.ie

Activities for Later Stages of Dementia

Sensory stimulation given with a warm and gentle approach may be enjoyable for someone with dementia, even if he/she is unable to respond verbally, and is not physically active. These activities can be enjoyed at any stage but particularly as dementia progresses.

Listening to familiar music, being read to from favourite books or poetry collections, having prayers said, looking at family photographs, watching babies or young children or animals, smelling flowers, eating small tasty treats, and feeling a variety of different fabrics, objects, and soft toys are also enjoyable experiences.

Personal care activities that involve touching such as gentle brushing of hair, using a foot spa, having a neck or hand massage with scented oils or lotions may also be soothing and comforting to a person with dementia.

Conclusion

The activities of our lives provide us with opportunities for expressing ourselves, experiencing a sense of identity, a sense of inclusion in life tasks, a sense of contributing to others, comfort, fun, and enjoyment, as well as meeting our need for occupation.

Family carers may feel overwhelmed by their caring roles and the scope of their family, employment and/or household duties. It may not be possible for some to use many of the suggestions here. However it may be possible to occasionally arrange for other family members, including grandchildren or friends and neighbours, to participate in an activity with the person with dementia.

We have more factsheets on making a Life Story Book, Sorting and Tidying, Making and using a Conversation / Memory Box and other activity ideas.

Contact the Alzheimer National Helpline on 1800 341 341 for more information.