

How to Engage a Person with Dementia

Strategies to help you plan and provide meaningful activities

The symptoms of memory loss, difficulty planning and decreased initiative will require the person with dementia to rely on others to help them find and/or create meaningful activities as dementia develops. Activities can be more than just hobbies and can include what we need to do for our job, our roles, our leisure time, and other things that we do each day. Engaging in activities gives us pleasure and adds meaning to our lives.

Why it's important to offer a variety of meaningful activities for people living with dementia

Participating in activities can help to prevent frustration, boredom and challenging behaviours.

Activities can:

- help the person maintain his or her independence.
- provide mental stimulation which can have a positive effect on cognitive functioning
- improve physical activity and general health which can prevent other health problems from developing.
- promote social interaction which can reduce feelings of loneliness, isolation and depression.
- improve sleep habits by minimizing napping and encouraging a better night's sleep.
- improve self-esteem by providing a successful and enjoyable activity
- reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety
- minimize frustrating behaviours by allowing the person to express his or her feelings.
- bring pleasure to both you and the person with dementia as you share these moments together.

Planning meaningful activities

The following are things to consider when planning activities. Remember that the planned activity will need to be appropriate and individualized according to the person's background, work history, leisure interests,

social preferences, and personal care habits and routines.

- Keep the person's skills and abilities in mind.
- Pay special attention to what the person enjoys.
- Consider if the person begins activities without direction.
- Be aware of physical limitations.
- Focus on enjoyment, not achievement.
- Encourage involvement in daily life activities.
- Relate to past work life.
- Look for favorite activities.
- Consider time of day.

Your approach

You will need to determine how much help and support will be needed to achieve success. If you notice a person's attention span waning or frustration level increasing, it is likely time to end or modify the activity.

- **Help get the activity started.** Most people with dementia still have the energy and desire to do things but may lack the ability to organize, plan, initiate and successfully complete the task.
- **Offer support and supervision.** You may need to show the person how to perform the activity and provide simple, easy-to-follow steps.
- **Concentrate on the process, not the result.** Does it matter if the towels are folded properly? Not really. What matters is that you were able to spend time together, and that the person feels as if he or she has done something useful.
- **Be flexible.** When the person insists that he or she doesn't want to do something, it may be because he or she can't do it or fears doing it. Don't force it. If the person insists on doing the activity a different way, let it happen, and change it later if necessary.
- **Let the individual know he or she is needed.** Ask, "Could you please help me?" Be careful, however, not to place too many demands upon the person.

- **Assist with difficult parts of the task.** If you're cooking, and the person can't measure the ingredients, finish the measuring and say, "Would you please stir this for me?"
- **Stress a sense of purpose.** If you ask the person to make a card, he or she may not respond. But, if you say that you're sending a special get-well card to a friend and invite him or her to join you, the person may enjoy working with you.
- **Don't criticize or correct the person.** If the person enjoys a harmless activity, even if it seems insignificant or meaningless to you, encourage the person to continue.
- **Encourage self-expression.** Include activities that allow the person a chance for expression. These types of activities could include painting, drawing, music or conversation.
- **Involve the person through conversation.** While you're polishing shoes, washing the car or cooking dinner, talk to the person about what you're doing. Even if the person cannot respond, he or she is likely to benefit from your communication.
- **Substitute an activity for a behaviour.** If a person with dementia rubs his or her hand on a table, provide a cloth and encourage the person to wipe the table. Or, if the person is moving his or her feet on the floor, play some music so the person can tap to the beat.
- **Try again later.** If something isn't working, it may just be the wrong time of day or the activity may be too complicated. Try again later, or adapt the activity.

Activities to try:

- **Hobbies and crafts:** crossword puzzles, painting, gardening, picking berries, visit a garden centre, knitting or other crafts.
- **Exercise:** go for walks, try yoga or tai chi, or go for a swim.
- **Music:** listen to favorite music, dance, sing along
- **Reading** to the person, audio books
- **Games:** sorting games, card games, play ball games using balloons or large soft balls, lawn games such as croquet.
- **Daily tasks and chores:** bake together, clean up together such as sweeping, wiping off the table, folding towels, polish silverware.

- **Reminisce:** talk about old times, watch family videos, go through photo albums, make a memory box filled with mementos from their life, make up a life story book with their help.
- **Watching television** together.
- **Sensory:** talk to the person, comb the person's hair, shave his face, give her a manicure or hand massage.

For more suggestions about types of meaningful activities to try, please contact your local Alzheimer Society. They will provide you with helpful ideas.

A word about apathy

Apathy is a word that describes loss of interest, motivation and/or persistence. The person with dementia may develop apathy and feel unmotivated to do anything. Apathy can be a symptom of depression but it can also occur separately from depression. Here are some strategies on how to respond to apathy:

- Try to engage the person with dementia in activities that they enjoy.
- Make sure that the person is not overwhelmed.
- Be ready to help start an activity.
- Try introducing a small amount of the activity at a time.
- Try activities that do not require active participation, such as listening to music.
- Emphasize more on the process of doing things and not the results.
- Make the person feel valued and productive.
- Help the person feel included in groups.

Things to keep in mind

Engaging the person with dementia in activity may be a challenge for the caregiver. Try to focus on the person and not the disease when planning activities. Remember, it is all about the process and not the result of the activity that matters.

Resources:

- **Activities: A Guide for Carers of People with Dementia:** www.alzscot.org
- **Activities Fact Sheet:** www.alz.org

This fact sheet was provided courtesy of the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa and Renfrew County