Creating A Dementia-Friendly Home: Creating Meaningful Activities

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Why Do People Need Activity?

• Activity is essential to human existence, health and wellbeing

• The urge to engage in activity that is **purposeful** and **meaningful** is a basic human drive

• This in-built motivation does not diminish or disappear as people age
What do people with dementia get from activity?

Activity has the potential to:

• Enhance quality of life
• Increase self esteem and self awareness
• Promote strengths and abilities
• Reduce rate of cognitive decline
• Relieve boredom
• Decrease restlessness and agitation
• Enhance relationships and communication
To be effective, activities must:

- Draw on remaining abilities and knowledge
- Be **meaningful** - call on the person’s past
- Provide cognitive & sensory stimulation
- Be adult level as long as possible
- Be simple but entertaining
- Be short depending on person’s abilities
Main Concept #1: At every stage there is a range of capability

It’s important to analyze an activity & provide ways to participate.

Intellectual skills are not all lost at once...think about what the person can still do and make the most of remaining abilities.

Most individuals can participate in some way—whether stirring lemonade or participating in a conversation
Early Stage

People at early stage may place greater significance on typical everyday activities in order to maintain a sense of continuity and contribution.

- Setting a table
- Folding laundry
- Tidying tasks
- Preparing food

The person can plan on working towards achieving a goal but may need direction. Directions need to be simple.

The person may be able to independently carry out familiar tasks when in familiar surroundings.
Middle Stage

Person is more likely to participate in activities they can relate to such as reminiscing about a time that they can recall.

Participation is more focused on the process of taking part in the activity than the end result.

Person is experiencing growing difficulties in perceiving and understanding the world of ‘others’, initiating activities.

The ability to both initiate and sequence a task is impaired; more complex activities need to be directed one step at a time.
Late Stage

Focus on providing direct sensory stimulation to help raise a person’s self-awareness (Example: hand massage, music)

Suitable activities can help the person focus and sustain attention for brief periods of time.

It is not the end product that is important but the opportunity to engage in the activity.
Sensory Stimulation = Brain Stimulation

- Nerves in our eyes and ears turn light and sound waves into sensory impressions.
- The gustatory nerves in our taste buds and the olfactory nerves in our noses turn certain molecules into tastes and smells.
- The nerve endings in our skin and almost every other part of our body turn pressure and temperature into sensations we “feel”.

But we don’t hear and see and taste with those nerves. It is our brain that turns environmental stimulation into sensation.

**Sensory stimulation is BRAIN stimulation.**

**Proprioceptive Stimulation** This system (muscles, joints) informs us where the parts of our body are and how they are moving. Example: Hugs, Massage

**Vestibular Stimulation** This 3 part system (eyes, ear and proprioception) helps us interpret movement and helps give us balance. Examples: Rocking chair, swing, walking on uneven surfaces
Sensory Activity: What’s that Smell?

Create a collection of mostly recognizable scents; herbs and spices are a good place to start. One by one, smell and identify the substance. Talk about memories that a particular smell might elicit. This simple activity is sensory, cognitive and reminiscent, as well as enjoyable.
Sensory Activity: Create A Virtual Beach
Main Concept #2:
Process vs End Product

The most important thing is the enjoyment of the activity....Not the correctness of the activity. It’s not the end product that is important, but the opportunity to engage in an activity.
Main Concept #3: What works today may not work tomorrow

Try to be flexible and creative
Main Concept #4: Not everyone is flexible and creative

• People with dementia lose the ability to initiate activities and entertain themselves
• When an activity is initiated, it is important that it is meaningful and doesn’t overstress the individual
• The caregivers of the individual, with all they are expected to do, may not have the time or physical and creative energy to organize activities- day care centers, other family, friends or paid caregivers may be needed
Main concept #5: “Doing” things has many meanings

• “Doing” things can become difficult for a person with dementia but it is unusual for a person with dementia to be unable to engage with their world at all.

• Engaging in an activity can vary from just observing objects and people to complex types of activity such as cooking a meal.

Remember: Individuals with dementia may feel boredom as deeply as anyone else. They can no longer plan their own activities, and boredom can turn into frustration. This can lead to wandering and agitation.
**Major Concept #6: Emotional Awareness & Memory Remains**

Emotional memory is the memory of the feelings associated with an event, as opposed to the facts of the event. Emotional memory is a persisting asset of persons with Alzheimer’s Disease.

In many ways, the person with Alzheimer's disease’s emotional sensitivity is enhanced. This means that the person tends to communicate more on an emotional level.

The person is very aware of the emotions and moods of others, and often very susceptible to picking up these moods.
“People will forget what you say,
Forget what you do,
But they do not forget how you made them feel.”

Maya Angelou
How To Select An Appropriate Activity

Most people gain benefit from an activity which matches their interests and level of cognitive ability.

The ability to engage in an activity will change for each person throughout the course of the dementia.

Be ready to adapt an activity depending on the limitations of the person.

The person who sees themselves as a “helper” will have increased self esteem. Asking the person to “assist” you can be more likely to be met with positive results.
Activity: Matching Socks

This activity can give the person with memory loss a sense of purpose and contribution to the household.

Earlier Stage: Sorting different sizes/shades of black socks
Later Stage: Matching one sock of each color to its mate

Even if the socks aren’t really worn by anyone, just unmatched and given back to the person later, this is a good way to keep fingers limber and minds occupied.

Because this is a chore that is stored in long-term memory banks, even people in the late stages of the disease can generally complete this task and feel useful while doing so.
Activity Analysis: Coloring
Responses to an Activity

If the person appears uncomfortable or distressed then don’t continue with the activity. Try to figure out why this may have occurred.

The Challenge

• Some people are happy to sit and watch what is going on around them for a while rather than being actively involved.
• Recognizing if sitting and watching is really what the person wants
• What does ‘no’ to an activity really mean?

If might be as simple as this. Maybe you are talking too fast, so the person that is deeply forgetful can't absorb all the information you are giving them. So they say "no".

Bob DeMarco , Alzheimers Reading Room
Reading

Studies have found that reading is one of the last skills to fade away. Reading is automatic—like a reflex. Print should be large and bold. Should have engaging photos, be age appropriate with limited text.
Exercise: Take a Walk, Chair Yoga

- Exercise reduces anxiety and may help prevent other illnesses & infections
- Allows person to interact with their natural environment and other people
Gardening: Engage the Senses

- Simple, effective & meaningful activity
- Connects person with nature & life
- Active participation or observer of nature
  - sights
  - Sounds
  - Smells
  - Physical sensations
- Beneficial to spiritual, psychological, social, & physical health
Music

- One of the best, most effective ways to create a calm, soothing and enjoyable environment

- Participation can be with instruments or singing
  - An individual who played the piano most of his life is often able to play entire songs perfectly.
  - Many people will remember song lyrics and enjoy singing them long after other communication skills are gone.
  - Music Therapy is proving to be an effective therapy for individuals with dementia
  - Music videos
Respite Videos

1. Respite Video Series- Provides the caregiver a respite from the challenges of caring. Include music, light movement, and reminiscence.

1. Nature Videos-

2. Videos with children/animals/music-
   Ex.: Hap Palmer DVDs
Have A Conversation

- Encourage talking while actively listening
- Ask opinion-type questions to reduce risk of erroneous answers
- Accept whatever answer you are given
- Do not argue with the person
- One-to-one time is essential in creating a connection
- Maintain eye contact
Simple Household Chores

- Provides a connection with everyday activities of life
- Provides sense of purpose & accomplishment as they assist with family chores

Examples
- Sorting & folding clothes
- Dusting furniture
- Setting table
- Assist with meal preparation
- Cutting coupons
- Shredding old bills
If the person enjoys a job, try to let him do it as often as he wants. It won’t hurt a towel to get folded 50 times in a day.
Games

- Counting or matching games with cards or dice (in early stage)
- Play catch with a balloon, foam ball, velcro mitt
- Horseshoes
- Darts
- Jigsaw puzzles
Art & Craft Activities

- Modeling clay
- Stringing medium/large beads
- Sanding / painting wood
- Coloring
- Flower arranging
- Pattern tiles
- Scrapbooking
Reminiscence Activities

Appreciates the person’s long term memory
Helps increase alertness, social interaction and verbalization, humor, awareness of self

- Family photo albums with captions
- Memory games
Pet Therapy

- Must be a docile animal
- Studies show pet-therapy can:
  - Lower blood pressure; Reduce stress & anxiety
  - Encourage vocalization & social interaction
  - Increases survival rates following heart attack or major surgery
- Can decrease aggressive or hyperactive behavior
- Can relieve depression & disorientation
- Can improve morale, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect
Pet Therapy

- Provides a non-threatening environment for play & self-expression
- Provides opportunity for positive non-verbal communication
  - Physical contact & gentle touch may be something people may be lacking in day-to-day life
- Can help individuals recall happy memories
- Be careful- Not everyone likes animals!
Easy Care Animals = Respite Care

Soft toy animals and battery operated animals are a good alternative and/or addition.

Regular contact can
• lower agitation and isolation.
• improve mood and increase communication and relaxation.
• Some people communicate more readily with a pet than with humans.
Food Prep Activities

Participation in food prep can be as complex as making a salad or as basic as peeling a potato. Ideas for simpler tasks:

- “Snapping” beans
- Pick grapes off the bunch
- Peel apple or potato
- Shuck corn
Other Simple Activities

- Hiding coins in a big bowl of uncooked rice
- Sorting nuts & bolts, buttons, beads
- Rolling yarn into balls
- Shredding paper
- Making greeting cards
- Dancing
- Anything that is safe and “fail-proof”

**Simple activities can be just as enjoyable as more complex ones.**
Going On An Outing

Where can you go to get your senses stimulated and no one cares if you talk, get up and move around?

- Baseball Game
- Farmers Market
- Ice Cream Shop
- Zoo
- Picnic
- Playground
- Flower Shop/Show
- Aquarium/ Fish tank
Some Additional Thoughts

- If an individual stops a task after a few minutes, instead of urging him to go on, focus your attention on what he has accomplished.
- Be careful not to overstimulate. Too much stimulation, activity, or pressure to learn may upset the confused person, may upset the caregiver, and may accomplish nothing.
- Withdrawal may be a person’s way of coping...insisting on participation may have a negative effect.
- An individual may increase the amount of time spent on an activity as days go by.
- Arrange activities for success such as considering the person (and the caregiver’s) best time of day.
And when All Else Fails....... 

Take a ride in the car

(many confused people enjoy riding in a car)
RESOURCES

1. Best Alzheimer’s Products
   http://www.best-alzheimers-products.com/
   - Calico Cat
   - Pattern Blocks and Board
   - Respite Videos
   - Exercise Videos
   - Puzzles and Activity Books

2. Independent Living Aids
   http://www.independentliving.com/
   - Posture Rite Lap Desk