

The Importance of Meaningful Activities

We each have *things to do* that fill our day. We dress ourselves and perform many household chores. We plan our day as we fix breakfast and send the kids off to school. We have hobbies, interests, likes and dislikes. With our skills we go off to work and with our talents we can dream and make future plans. These things occupy major portions of our days and without them we would soon become so restless and bored that we would search for new friends, tasks or interests. *Having things to do* also helps to define who we are, provides us with worth and success.

The world of someone with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia is often filled with boredom, confusion and failures. The course of this illness robs the individual of the ability to do familiar things or participate in former interest. Extended periods of idle time contribute to feelings of restlessness and ultimately lead to uselessness and agitation. An individual with dementia needs help finding *something to do* that restores sense of individuality and self-worth. For the person with dementia it can be anything that keeps them involved in the world around them and reinstates normal roles of spouse, worker, consumer, friend and so forth.

The most meaningful *things to do* are those which allow the person to be involved in something that brings good memories from the past and facilitates a connection with who they are and have been during their lifetime.

When people are involved in *doing familiar things*:

- their individuality as a person is retained and they can connect to previous interests and success,
- they have some control over their environment,
- anxiety and fear of failure are removed,
- they have *something to do* which structures time
- and normalizes the days events,
- being busy may help to lessen undesirable behavior such as wandering or rummaging,
- the caregiver can enjoy *doing something* as him/herself, as well as for the person.

The value in having *something to do* lies in experiencing pleasure and success for the "moment" it is taking place...not in the outcome or what may be produced.

56 Things to Do with a Person with Dementia

1. Hang up colorful travel posters of the “old country”, National Parks, or other scenes of interest.
2. Pick up old magazines at rummage sales, LIFE...LOOK...POST...or other inexpensive ‘mementos’ of the past.
3. Provide a list of proverbs, slogans, phrases, or limericks to finish.
4. Offer Mother Goose Rhymes printed on large cards to read.
5. Provide word games...opposites, riddles, hangman (have a list).
6. Create a safe ‘junk’ drawer or box specific to interest.
7. Create a ‘memory box’ that can travel.
8. Place unwound yarn in a coffee can with a hole in the plastic cover; yarn can be pulled and wound into a ball.
9. Cut up pieces of rug yarn...sort by color.
10. Make pie crust (from scratch or pre-made) and roll it out. Eat a pie that was baked *during* the above activity.
11. Match socks (a dozen pair of bright colors).
12. Take knots out of pre-knotted dish towels or tube socks.
13. Sort colored plastic eggs into empty egg cartons.
14. Fold old linen napkins, pretty towels, scarves.
15. Provide basket or case full of tiny baby clothes scented with baby powder to fold, caress, snap, button, tie, enjoy & remember!!!
16. ‘Polish’ and sort silverware into a plastic tray. Sort large buttons, spools, nuts and bolts, plastic bottle tops, etc. Avoid items small enough to be swallowed.
17. Cut buttons off old sweaters, shirts, etc., (donated from a thrift shop). Use sandwich bags to ‘package’ the button sets and return to thrift shop to be sold.
18. File folders from past ‘work-type’ experiences (example: invoices, cancelled checks, sales slips, order blanks, ledger pages, and old tax records). Set up an ‘office’ for 15 minutes.
19. Create scrap books using page protectors, clear contact paper or photo albums with edges taped (3 hole binders work well as the pages can be removed and shared as a group program). Use *uncluttered, happy pictures*.
20. Assorted heavy duty zippers to zip and unzip.
21. Old fashioned tie-in-the-back aprons with pockets for the women and nail aprons for the men with ‘safe’ stuff to ‘possess’ in the pockets (i.e., keys, wallet, handkerchief, notepad & pencil, deck of cards, measuring spoons, etc.).
22. Provide a stationary bike or pedals for exercises.
23. Old fashioned carpet sweeper for pushing.
24. A nurf ball, sponge ball or balloon to toss around.
25. A putting green in the yard (plastic cup buried in the ground). Indoors make a masking tape circle on the floor. Also use an ice cream pail for a bean bag target.
26. Provide a gentle massage, foot soaks, and manicures.
27. Ask a friend or neighbor with a baby or pet to visit, especially if children and pets have been a part of the individual’s life experience.
28. Birdfeeders...string cheerios on yarn threaded through with a blunt plastic needle.
29. Make frozen bread dough into ‘Bird Bread’ for the feeder. Bake frozen bread dough to eat while working on the project.
30. Unravel 2”x4” pieces of cut up sweaters for ‘stuffing’.

31. Develop a collection of empty food containers to be put on a shelf (cereal, salt & other spices, egg carton, butter, clean safe cans, etc.) to facilitate 'shopping'.
32. Develop a simple matching game of cards with pictures and words (easy to make with recipe cards).
33. Mount simple latches, knobs, hinges, slide bolts, hooks, and locks to small boards. Generally not more than 2 to 3 items to a board.
34. Use wooden puzzles of 12-16 pieces with adult themes.
35. Adult theme pictures to color or water paint, mount on tag board and display.
36. Pieces of PVC pipe cut into short lengths with assorted elbows and "t" joints to manipulate and assemble.
37. Lincoln log sets or variety of other blocks are great for stacking or building.
38. Water paint using regular water paint paper and 8 basic colors.
39. Cut up old greeting cards (stiff paper to handle). Can be glued onto tag board or just 'sort'.
40. Cut coupons...can put into used envelopes and file in a box or container.
41. Tear rags from old sheets, material, worn clothing (a common activity for persons from the present older generation to make rugs, bandages, garden rags).
42. Trace & cut familiar shapes...hearts, shamrocks, leaves...from colored paper.
43. Notebook and school pencil with some easy-to-read material (lists, numbers, and short messages) to copy. This generation did copy or tracing work in school.
44. Old type clothes pins to sort, put together in pairs, or hang the wash (single line inside or out).
45. Nylon or cotton 'stockings' (not panty-hose) to 'roll' or 'tuck' and put into small cases.
46. Make "finger food" snacks. Frost graham crackers with vanilla or chocolate, fill celery with soft cheese or peanut butter, stick pineapple chunks...apple slices...grapes...orange slices...etc. onto toothpicks. Cut finger jello into squares. Form popcorn balls with light syrup mixture.
47. Wrap coins into coin holders (always with supervision).
48. Have family/friends make audio cassette tapes or video tapes of familiar people, places and voices.
49. Blow bubbles using either a small or big wand.
50. Use decks of cards and dominos to invent simple games or just sort. Checkers can simply be used to match the colors on the board.
51. Stuffed animals are comforting...must be washable and safe.
52. Encourage domestic chores, such as dishes, dusting, watering plants, making beds, dust mopping, wiping surfaces, sprinkling cloth napkins and ironing with a child-type safe iron that only gets warm.
53. Polish shoes...cream polish and rag for shining, good activity for men.
54. Old toasters, mix-master, or radio with cord cut off are great for dismantling with a screwdriver or pliers.
55. Provide a bag of assorted men's and women's gloves/mittens to sort and try on. Also, use colorful hats, costume jewelry, neckties, belts, bow ties and other safe accessories.
56. Make a photo album of family pictures copied on a copier to protect the originals. Label photos with names and relationship of person with dementia or family member.

General principles to remember:

- All activities should be designed to provide a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction.
- Keep instructions simple, one sentence at a time ("This is a ball. Watch the ball. I am throwing it to you.")
- Allow the individual the opportunity to do as much as he/she is able to do, emphasizing self-esteem. Be careful not to ask him/her to do things that cause frustration or agitation. Carefully observe what the individual can or cannot do, and realize this will change as the disease progresses.

- If little interest is shown in participating in an activity, don't push. Move onto something else. You may try again later.
- Give frequent praise to the person with dementia. Measure success by the pleasure and enjoyment in what he/she is doing or has accomplished, even if it's not what you had planned. Don't feel you have failed if *your expectations* have not been met.
- In all stages of the disease, exercise and music are important and beneficial. Walking should be encouraged. When ambulation is not possible, passive or range-of-motion exercises should be part of a daily program. Don't call it exercise. Responding to music by dancing, stretching, tapping, singing, clapping, etc. is generally well received by the person with dementia as being normal and enjoyable.
- When talking to the person with dementia use both verbal *and* non-verbal communication. Use gestures to model what you would like for him/her to do. Touching, facial and body expression, and good eye contact are important. Persons with dementia will often mimic the actions of others even when they do not understand the words.
- Try not to introduce anything new. The person is having enough trouble retaining what he/she has already learned.

Remember to preserve the person's sense of self and self-worth, by trying to see the world around him/her as he/she might be seeing it!