



ALZHEIMER'S AND DEMENTIA CAREGIVING

30 Activities for Older Adults with Dementia

Games, crafts, and outdoor fun can make your loved one feel valued, connected, and engaged. Try these creative activities to boost their mood and help keep their brains active.

By Hallie Levine





care and can improve your loved one's quality of life," says Shadi Gholizadeh, PhD, MPH, Director of [Memory Care](#) at TheKey. "A family member who spends time doing activities with a loved one or incorporating connection and engagement into interactions is supporting their sense of purpose and helping them feel valued."

In addition to building confidence and connection, games, crafts, and tasks can provide your loved one with a purpose. "Activities give a person with dementia a sense of accomplishment," explains Anne Basting, PhD, founder of [TimeSlips](#), a network of artists and caregivers committed to creatively engaging older adults.

Finding activities your loved one will enjoy and that are appropriate for their abilities is critical. A person in the early stages of dementia, for example, will likely be drawn to activities that are challenging enough to be engaging, but not so challenging that they get frustrated. Someone in the middle stages of dementia may be able to do some or all of those same activities, but they will likely need you to break each one down into steps. Older adults with late-stage dementia often do best with activities that focus on the senses or can be completed in one step.

So what types of activities might be best for *your* loved one? A [study](#) in the journal *Gerontologist* found that people with...

- **Mild dementia** could do fairly complex arts and crafts projects as well as activities like concentration card games that focus on cognitive activities for about a half hour.



- **Severe dementia** did best with simple physical exercises and sensory or sorting activities for approximately 15 minutes.

These findings can serve as a general guide, but you'll want to try different activities with your loved one and see what they like and respond to.

To give you some ideas, we spoke to experts from TheKey to put together this list of fun things to do with your older adult. The activities are divided into different categories so that you can pick and choose what you think might be best for your loved one at any given moment. Every activity is designed to help them feel creative, stimulated, and happily involved.

5 Fun Games to Play Together

The following games can provide cognitive stimulation and could be especially helpful for people in the early stages of dementia. For example, activities such as [playing card games or doing jigsaw puzzles](#) were found to lower the risk of Alzheimer's disease, according to a 2022 study in the journal *Neurology*.

"They're simple activities, but they keep the brain active," says Dr. Gholizadeh. They also foster conversations between loved ones and their family caregivers. Here are some to try:

Alphabet soup: Choose a topic, such as travel, sports, or food, and take turns writing related words that begin with each letter of the alphabet.

Block tapping: Use blocks or dominoes to create a memory test game based on sound. Tap the dominoes in an order you can remember, then ask your loved



improve memory, problem-solving abilities, and prevent cognitive decline among cognitively healthy adults over the age of 50, according to a study published in the journal *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience*.

Card games: More elaborate games such as gin rummy and poker may still be enjoyable, but they might also start to become harder for your loved one to follow, says Dr. Gholizadeh. Childhood favorites such as War, Go Fish, or [Uno](#) may be easier and more fun for them. Plus, they can play these games with the grandkids for an added opportunity to connect and be engaged.

Word scrambles: You can buy a [book of word scrambles](#) or create some word scrambles on a piece of paper for your loved one to work on. You can also pick specific words and start conversations around them. For example, if the word is “animal,” you might have a discussion about childhood pets. Or choose two words and try to figure out together how they’re related. For instance, if the two words are “table” and “tree,” you can talk about how they are related because tables are made of wood, which comes from trees.

These types of word games may be most appropriate for loved ones in the earliest stage of dementia, says Dr. Gholizadeh. Sometimes people will refuse to play because they feel put on the spot, she adds. In such situations, it’s important to reframe the activity. “One of our professional caretakers told her client, a former college professor, that she needed help with a night class. That way, she was able to get him to play idioms (sayings) games with her because the activity was tied to a sense of purpose,” says Dr. Gholizadeh.

6 Activities to Inspire Creativity



have moderate or severe dementia, we try to shift them away from activities that rely on memory," says Dr. Basting, who is also a Scientific Advisory Board member for TheKey. "You don't want your loved one to feel like they are failing." Instead, she recommends that you tap their creative juices so that they can "make something that can be valuable and shared with others," she says. The following ideas can be fun for them:

Do scrapbooking: Choose a subject (like nature, travel, or animals, for instance), then have your loved one cut out related pictures from old magazines or illustrated books with safety scissors. Write the theme at the top of a scrapbook or notebook, and together, paste or tape the pictures into it. Sorting, cutting, and pasting are great for hand mobility, so encourage your loved one to participate as much as they can. While going through the pictures, engage them in conversation about the images.

Paint a picture: Set up all the materials they will need in advance, like thick paper, brushes, watercolor paints ([you can also buy a paint-with-water set](#)), a tarp for the floor, and an apron for them. Suggest objects for them to paint, like a tree or a house. Start a conversation about the colors and what your loved one is painting.

Create a photo album: Choose photos that are meaningful to your loved one or that represent moments and people from their life, and put them in an album. This could include family snapshots, photos of them as a child, vacation pictures, wedding photos, photos of a favorite pet, and pictures of friends. Ask your loved one what's going on in each photo. Don't correct them if they don't remember things exactly as they happened, says Dr. Basting. Just go with it.



pictures?' I never know what she will or will not remember, but it's an open portal as to where she is that day."

Draw a family tree: You can work with your loved one to draw and map out your immediate and extended family. Then, ask open-ended questions about certain members, Dr. Basting suggests. For instance, you could say, "What did you and your brother John like to do together as kids?" You may notice that your loved one's memories are strongest from early childhood through their early 30s. Focus on positive memories from those times. If your loved one seems frustrated or can't remember people, don't push them. Simply move on to another family member—or another activity.

Ask a "Beautiful Question:" This is a concept that Dr. Basting created. "A Beautiful Question opens a shared path of discovery by asking an open-ended question with no right or wrong answer," she says. Examples include, "What is something you treasure in your home and why?" or "What is the most beautiful sound in the world?" The question should not be too complicated. "It should appeal to the person's emotional memory and have a playful component as well," says Dr. Basting, who is also the author of *Creative Care: A Revolutionary Approach to Dementia and Elder Care*. Remember, there's no wrong answer. Anything your loved one says is valid. [RELATED: [5 Excellent Books for Family Caregivers—and the Best Takeaways](#)]

Have a sing-along: A 2021 review published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* found that people living with dementia who participated in a [group singing activity](#) had better quality of life, cognition, and overall well-being—and so did their caretakers. There are specific singing groups tailored to people



that you and your loved one can sing along with.

5 Physical Activities That Promote Health and Balance

Physical activity “helps reduce blood pressure, lowers stress, and relieves anxiety and depression, all of which impact a person with dementia,” Dr. Basting says.

While your loved one may not have the agility or balance to move in the same ways as they once did, many activities can be modified as needed. Someone who was an avid runner may enjoy taking walks with their caregiver, or if they like cycling, they may benefit from riding a stationary bike. Lifting light weights and trying chair yoga can also help older adults maintain their strength and flexibility. Other options for those who are less mobile include:

Scarf dancing: This activity not only gets your loved one moving, it also improves their balance. Encourage them to use their arms to make big movements, such as waving them overhead. Then, toss scarves to them from different angles so that they turn and reach in different directions. For example, toss a scarf to their right, or high in the air. If they have trouble standing, scarf dancing can be done sitting or in bed.

Dress-up: Pretend that you’re going someplace fun, like to a party or sporting event. Then lay out clothes for your loved one to choose from. These can be items from your loved one’s closet, or fun accessories like a colorful hat and big sunglasses. Let them pick the clothes they like, but stand by and be ready to help if they need assistance. This can also be a good physical challenge for their coordination and endurance, but have a chair handy in case they need to



review in *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*. If it's too difficult for them to stand to do tai chi exercises, there are chair versions available. Check out [this tai chi video](#) or [this video with seated tai chi](#).

Balloon batting: Blow up a balloon and bat it back and forth with your loved one, trying to keep it up in the air. They can do this sitting or standing.

Step dancing: Describe easy dance steps to your loved one and have them do the moves. For instance, say, “Step your right foot forward and clap your hands.” Put on music with a simple beat they can try to match. For even more fun (or to help motivate them), join in and do the moves with them.

7 Outdoor Ventures That Can Boost Mood

People living with dementia can benefit from spending time outside. A study published in the journal *Dementia* found that [exposure to nature](#) was associated with positive effects on mood. And a review of 17 studies concluded that spending [time outdoors in a garden](#) helped reduce agitation among people with dementia.

“The sunshine and movement through nature is really important for people with dementia, especially those who loved the outdoors when they were younger,” says Dr. Basting. “It’s also very [nurturing for caregivers](#). It encourages them to be in the moment.” When you and your loved one are outdoors, Dr. Basting suggests that you both take time to stop and really look at things. “Talk to your loved one about a blade of grass, for instance—its color, how it feels, how it smells,” she says. “The two of you can immerse yourself in the world around you with all of your senses.”



• PRACTICING IN THE BACKYARD

- Taking a walk or a gentle hike
- Planting flowers
- Watering the garden
- Feeding ducks or birds
- Sitting on a bench near a lake and listening and observing
- Collecting shells at the beach

7 Ways to Stimulate Their Senses

Sensory stimulation may help improve memory and cognition, according to a 2021 review in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*. "If you want a direct channel to connect with a person with dementia, go through their senses," says Dr. Basting. "The activity can be as simple as having your loved one touch a soft corduroy jacket and talk about memories it evokes. It's a way to spend some beautiful, quiet time together." Try these sensory-stimulating activities:

Arrange flowers: Put two or three vases of the same height on a table and trim flower stems to the length of the vases. Separate the flowers on the table so it's easy for your loved one to select individual stems—sorting flowers is good for their hand mobility. They can choose the flowers they like to make arrangements. While they're creating, talk about related topics, such as what they are noticing about the flowers, or what kind of flowers they would like to receive as a gift. You can help them place the finished bouquets around the



Cook a meal together: Focus on meal prep your loved one can help with, like mashing potatoes or putting salad ingredients in a bowl. Look for cooking tasks that build on their strengths and abilities. For instance, if they can grip and have enough dexterity, give them a peeler to peel vegetables as long as they can do it safely. If they have limited mobility, focus on their senses, and have them do activities such as putting different colored fruits in a fruit salad. First, have them add red ingredients like strawberries and raspberries, then blue fruits like blueberries, and so on.

Another fun idea is to make flavored water with them. Wash and dry fruits, vegetables, and herbs (try cucumber, blueberries, and mint, for instance) and put them on the counter. Fill a pitcher or two with water and have your loved one add the different fruits and herbs to create delicious, colorful drinks.

Do household tasks: Ask them to help you fold towels, put out the napkins for dinner, or sort the books on a bookshelf by height or color. If your loved one gets frustrated or has trouble, break the task down into smaller steps.

Treat them to a spa day: Create a calm environment with relaxing music, soft lighting, and fresh towels. Give them an aromatherapy hand massage using scented lotion or a manicure with pretty nail polish.

Try some pet therapy: Visit a neighbor or relative with a friendly pooch. A review published in the journal *BMC Psychiatry* found that [pet therapy](#)—guided interaction between a person and a trained animal—may help to reduce symptoms such as agitation, restlessness, and aggression in people with

Alzheimer's disease. "Any kind of social interaction with an animal can be



and what it reminds them of. Or lightly brush their hair, which feels good and can also make them feel cared for.

Practice deep breathing: Have your loved one get comfy in their chair or bed, then encourage them to take a deep breath in, hold it for a few seconds, and exhale. This can be calming and stress-reducing.

What to Do When an Activity Isn't Working

If you notice that your loved one's attention span is waning or their frustration level has increased, it's a sign that you need to modify the activity, says Dr. Basting. Some [steps to try](#) include:

- 1. Break down the activity into simple, easy-to-follow tasks.** Focus on having them do one thing at a time to make it less overwhelming.
- 2. Help them with the difficult parts of the task.** If you're cooking, that could mean that you do most of it and your loved one does simple things like stirring.
- 3. Give it a purpose.** "Generosity is good for us and provides an activity with a sense of meaning," says Dr. Basting. "If you are doing a creative activity with your loved one, try turning it into a gift, such as a card for a friend or family member who might be sick or going through a challenging time."
- 4. Don't correct them.** They may not be doing things the "right" way, and that's okay, as long as they are engaged with the task.

If you've tried all these strategies and your loved one still doesn't seem interested or is getting tired or upset, pause the activity and don't feel