

Apathy

Apathy or indifference is defined as passivity and a lack of interest or enthusiasm. People with dementia may lose interest in activities or hobbies they once found interesting and fun. They often have trouble coming up with ideas for activities and may rely more on others to come up with things to do. Apathy is one of the most common symptoms in dementia, and the person with dementia is usually not aware of or bothered by it.

Apathy can be hard on families for many reasons. Families may have trouble getting used to passivity in a person who was once motivated and active. Families may worry that the person is sad, because apathy often resembles depression, although not everyone with apathy is depressed. Families may put a lot of effort into finding ways to engage the person with dementia, and this process may be tiring and frustrating. They may feel like they have failed when they are unable to get the person with dementia to be more active. The person with dementia often needs help from others to plan, set up, and start an activity. As the disease progresses, they will need more help to do simpler things. Finally, families may worry that inactivity will lead to other health problems.

The truth is, apathy is hard to treat. There are no medications to treat apathy, although Donepezil (used in people with Alzheimer's disease) can sometimes improve it. In many cases, the area of the brain (the frontal lobes) that makes a person active and interested is affected by the dementia. The person with dementia may not be able to start an activity on their own, but they may be able to engage once someone helps them get started. Sometimes, the person with dementia will need help to stay focused on an activity. Sometimes, activities that once held the person's attention become too much for them or too hard to follow. This does not mean the person "just needs to try harder"; they really cannot be active or show that familiar "spark" of interest and enthusiasm.

Things you can do to help:

- o Do not assume that old activities and hobbies are familiar and fun for the person with dementia; they may have become too difficult and confusing.
- o Work on accepting that apathy is a symptom of dementia, and try not to think of the person as being lazy. Find ways to appreciate the person as they are now, with less drive and interest than they had before.

- o Do not expect the person with dementia to suggest things to do.
- o Try to not let this become an area of conflict between you and the person with dementia. The conflict is not good for either of you!
- o Consider simpler physical exercise, such as walking, that is more “automatic.”
- o Try simpler activities that the person can do without being frustrated. For example, large piece puzzles, riding in the car, listening to music, and sorting, folding, or stacking objects, are some things that the person may enjoy doing.
- o Notice when they are having trouble with a task and offer enough help so that they can be successful without taking over. For example, if the person has difficulty starting a puzzle, you might help by telling them to sort the pieces by color first, then separate the edge pieces, etc.
- o Avoid asking open-ended questions that may result in the patient saying “no” or “nothing.” For example, instead of asking, “What do you want to do today?” ask, “What coat do you want to wear for our walk?”
- o Set a routine for activities. For example, try playing cards every day after dinner. Knowing what to expect may make it easier for the person with dementia.
- o For people who live in a care facility and who do not want to do group activities, ask if the activity director can offer one-on-one activities in the person’s room.
- o The Alzheimer’s Association website has a list of things to do that could be enjoyable for people with dementia:
www.alz.org/living_with_alzheimers_101_activities.asp

Things you can do to help make activities enjoyable for both of you:

Use visual cues	Show them what you want them to do.
Use tactile cues	Put the object in their dominant hand and place your hand under their hand to gently help them get started.

Offer encouragement and positive feedback	<p>“Good job!”</p> <p>“Thank you for helping.”</p> <p>“I like how you did that.”</p>
Communication tips on how to help a person with dementia do something	Avoid open-ended questions: Instead of saying, “What do you want to do today?” say, “It is time to take a walk. Do you want to walk to the park or to the coffee shop?”
Offer limited choices	<p>“Would you like to do the train puzzle or the dog puzzle?”</p> <p>“Should we play cards or dominoes?”</p> <p>“Let’s go for a ride in the car.”</p>
Ask them to help	<p>“Will you help me fold these towels?”</p> <p>“Will you help me sort these coins?”</p>
Ask them to try	“Will you give it a try?”
Tips on how to set up the environment for an activity	<p>Limit distractions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn off the television and/or radio • Find a quiet place without a lot of other activity going on • Remove or hide any clutter that is on or near workspace • Set up objects needed for the activity and consider the order that they will be used <p>Consider the objects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are they big enough to handle easily? • Can they get lost or accidentally ingested? • Are they brightly colored and/or visible against the background? • Are they interesting and stimulating?

	<p>Consider the person's comfort:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it too hot or too cold for an activity? • Have they used the bathroom and/or had a snack recently? • Is there a place to sit and rest nearby, if needed? • Could they be embarrassed or self-conscious in front of others? • Do they need medication for pain before a physical activity?
Activities do not have to be creative or complicated	Daily activities like grooming, helping with chores, and sharing a quiet moment can be meaningful.
Consider activities outside of the home. This will give you a break and the person with dementia will often be more social with a "stranger" than with a family member	Consider day programs, senior centers, or senior exercise programs with staff trained to work with people with dementia.