

ACTIVITIES FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

All people have a need to engage in activities that give us purpose, fuel our spirit, and meet our basic daily needs. As dementia progresses, a person's ability to participate in certain activities will change. Adapting activities to their changing abilities and remaining flexible are key to helping a person living with dementia remain engaged in a variety of activities that are meaningful to them.

Activities are not just about leisure — they also include the tasks we need to do on a daily basis, such as self-care and household chores. Involving the person living with dementia in these activities offers opportunities to feel productive and useful. Other areas of activities to consider include:

Anxiety-reducing activities

Help distract from responsive behaviours or feelings of anxiety and restlessness.

Repetitive activities such as brisk walks, cleaning the counter and sorting objects are particularly effective at reducing anxiety, especially in the later stages of dementia.

Sensory activities

Use at least one of the five senses to elicit pleasant feelings, memories, or a connection with the person's surroundings, e.g. aromatherapy, massage, feeling the water, or being barefoot in the sand.

Reminiscing activities

Offer an opportunity to recall the past and re-experience the emotions attached to these memories. Use familiar objects to prompt a memory. You can create a memory box tailored to the past interests of the person living with dementia. Try using other aids that incorporate a sensory experience, e.g. pictures, videos, smells, sounds, textures.

Choosing an activity

Skills and abilities

Focus on remaining skills and knowledge, not on the lost abilities. Be aware of physical problems that may interfere with participation.

Consider the person

Pay attention to the person's personality, likes, dislikes, and their past life experience.

Be flexible

Keep in mind that because of dementia, the person's preferences may change. They may be open to trying things that they would not have considered previously.

There will be good days and bad days. Activities that do not work one day may work another day, with or without adjustments. You likely will need to continue to make adjustments to an activity as abilities change.

Choice

You can set up an activity area where the person can choose between a few activities and where the materials are in plain sight.

Keep choices limited to prevent overwhelming the person living with dementia.

Assess

Once an activity is over, assess its success. Was it enjoyable? Was it too difficult? Too easy? Adapt the activity accordingly for the next time. You may find it helpful to keep a journal to keep track of your adaptations and how they are received.

How to introduce an activity

Give a reason for the activity

Introduce the activity by asking the person if they can help you with a project (or a chore). Framing the activity as a way to help and offering an end goal can enhance the person's sense of purpose and desire to complete the activity.

Simplify

Break down instructions into a few simple steps.

Support, don't do

Demonstrate as you instruct and offer help only when it is needed.

Be patient, slow down and repeat instructions as needed.

Do the activity with the person, or at least begin the activity with the person, as a way to show the different steps involved (it is often easier to mimic someone rather than listen to a set of instructions).

Ask the person to do only some parts of a project or leave partially completed activities around the house, e.g. leave the dinner table with only some of the plates and silverware set in the right place.

Remember, involving the person living with dementia in activities is not simply a way to keep them busy. Activities provide valuable opportunities to share a meaningful moment and boost self-esteem.

Offer encouragement and gratitude

Be supportive and encouraging. Do not criticize.

Thank the person or express your appreciation when the activity is over.

Where and when

Time

Choose the time of day that is the most appropriate for a specific activity. For example, for an activity that requires concentration and energy, choose a time when the person's level of functioning is at its highest, often in the morning. For an activity where the goal is to relieve tension, chose a time of day when the person tends to appear anxious, or just before that feeling usually occurs.

In the later stages of dementia, plan to keep activities short to accommodate the person's decreasing energy level and ability to concentrate.

Environment

Safety: Make sure that the environment is safe for the person with dementia.

Limit distractions: Ensure that the environment is quiet and does not have too many distractions.

Lighting: Make sure that the lighting is appropriate (bright enough, no glare).

Familiarity: Doing activities in a familiar environment helps to reduce stress and allows for better participation.

Routine

Whenever possible, integrate activities into a daily routine. Structure helps to orient the person living with dementia.

Early stage activities

Activities at this stage focus on retaining, practising, and improving remaining skills whenever possible. Encourage continuity with the person's current lifestyle and adapt where necessary to accommodate short-term memory and other lost skills.

Goals and outcomes:

- Provide a sense of purpose, belonging, and enjoyment
- Boost self-esteem
- Decrease anxiety
- Maintain socialization

Minimal supervision required



Middle stage activities

More severe memory loss and limited physical skills require simpler, shorter activities and instructions.

Goals and outcomes:

- Maintain self-esteem through participation in activities associated with previous roles
- Maintain communication and social skills
- Provide a sense of accomplishment and fun
- Prevent boredom
- Maintain good physical health

More supervision required



Late stage activities

Activities are shorter, less frequent, and demand less from the person living with dementia. Steps are greatly simplified to meet mental, physical, and social abilities. Repetitive activities are particularly calming and soothing. Focus on enhancing quality of life and connecting through emotions.

Goals and outcomes:

- Provide relief from stress and frustration
- Provide reassurance
- Promote dignity and comfort
- Connect with the person using all five senses

Supervision is required



Engaging the body and mind — examples

	EARLY	MIDDLE	LATE
• Exercising (e.g. stretching, resistance training, Tai Chi, Qigong, yoga, chair exercises)	✓		
• Finishing partially completed projects	✓		
• Dancing	✓	✓	
• Physical games (e.g. tossing a ball, horseshoes, keeping a balloon in the air, ring toss)	✓	✓	
• Doing chores around the house (e.g. sweeping, vacuuming, dishes, folding)	✓	✓	
• Playing dominoes and other games (e.g. card games, board games)	✓	✓	
• Doing arts and crafts (e.g. mosaic tiling, building bird houses, painting)	✓	✓	
• Doing word games (e.g. scrabble, finishing famous sayings or nursery rhymes, hangman, crosswords, etc.)	✓	✓	
• Participating in group activities (e.g. dancing, singing in a choir, day programs, seniors groups)	✓	✓	
• Going on outings (e.g. museum, visiting a new city, sightseeing, movies, sporting events)	✓	✓	
• Sharing an activity with a friend (e.g. arts and crafts, looking at photos, knitting, sing-a-longs, looking at travel magazines)	✓	✓	✓
• Visiting (e.g. families, friends, children)	✓	✓	✓
• Walking	✓	✓	✓
• Reminiscing (e.g. memory boxes, theme kits, the “old days”, looking at pictures or a photo book)	✓	✓	✓



Engaging the spirit — examples

	EARLY	MIDDLE	LATE
• Baking/cooking	✓	✓	
• Spending time with pets	✓	✓	✓
• Gardening (e.g. touching/smelling the soil, plants)	✓	✓	✓
• Aromatherapy (e.g. hand massage with scented lotion, using essential oils)	✓	✓	✓
• Massages (e.g. therapeutic touch, Reflexology, Reiki, foot rubs)	✓	✓	✓
• Music (e.g. old songs, concerts, easy listening, instrumental, sing-a-longs)	✓	✓	✓
• Movies (e.g. old movies, scenery videos, comedies)	✓	✓	✓
• Observing /studying (e.g. art works, magazine pictures, birds through the window, videos)	✓	✓	✓
• Walking in nature (e.g. visiting a garden, watching the sunset/sunrise)	✓	✓	✓
• Prayers or meditation	✓	✓	✓
• Playing with dolls/stuffed animals	✓	✓	✓
• Creating or exploring a memory box (e.g. theme boxes, bag with textured items)	✓	✓	✓
• Rummaging (e.g. in a “junk drawer” with safe objects, in a bin of textured materials, etc.)	✓	✓	

Activities are listed in the stages of dementia where they are usually the most beneficial or therapeutic; however, they can often be done at other stages depending on the individual's skills, abilities and interests.

The activities listed in this guide are merely some examples of ways in which you can engage the person living with dementia. Be creative, have fun and remember that the goal is not the final product, but the enjoyment of the activity.



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