

Hobbies, pastimes and everyday activities

We all need to do things that keep us occupied and stimulated. If you can help the person you are caring for to find activities that they enjoy, from taking a walk to looking at photos, you can improve their quality of life. This will make you feel better, too.

How can activities help someone with dementia?

- Taking part in activities will help the person you care for to maintain their skills. They may become more alert and interested in what is going on around them. Many activities are also interesting and fun.
- Carrying out simple tasks can help the person feel better about themselves by giving them a sense of achievement.
- Some types of activity can help the person you're caring for to express their feelings.

How can activities help you as a carer?

- Boredom and frustration are the two most common causes of challenging behaviour in people with dementia. If the person you are caring for is occupied and stimulated, some of the behaviour that you find most difficult may lessen or even stop altogether.
- Sharing an activity that you both enjoy will benefit you as much as the person you are caring for. It may also bring the two of you closer together, and help you find new ways to relate to each other.
- Discovering new ways to stimulate the person you care for can be satisfying, and may enable you to think differently about your caring role.

Talk with the person you are caring for to work out which activities fit in with their interests. Try to find imaginative ways to adapt their activities to their changing capabilities and moods. Here are some suggestions.

Exercise

Exercising together will help you and the person you care for. Exercise burns up the adrenalin produced by stress and frustration, and produces endorphins, which can promote feelings of happiness. This will help both of you relax and increase your sense of well-being. Exercise can help you develop a healthy appetite, enjoy increased energy levels and sleep better at night.

- Walking is a great form of exercise that provides a change of scene and some fresh air. Many carers find ingenious ways of arranging little trips, even if it is only to a local coffee shop.
- Swimming is another good all-round exercise, and the feeling of being in the water can be very soothing and calming.

- If you want something more sociable, find out if your local leisure or community centre offers classes for older people, such as gentle stretching or tai chi.

Reminders of the past

People with dementia can often remember the distant past more easily than recent events. If you can find a way to trigger the more distant, pleasant memories of the person you care for, they may become more lively and interested.

- Talk about the past together, while looking at old family photos or books with pictures, or listening to old music.
- Make up a 'rummage box' of old objects that the person with dementia is interested in. Physically handling things may trigger memories more effectively than looking at pictures.
- Talking about the past in this way can trigger strong emotions in the person you care for, so it's important to be sensitive. You may uncover painful memories as well as happy ones. Dementia damages the memory and the thinking and reasoning parts of the brain, but the emotions still remain intact.

In the early stages

In the early stages of dementia, the person will probably want to continue doing the things they have always done. People with dementia retain memory for some activities, depending on which part of the brain has been damaged. Activities such as reading, typing or playing the piano are not always affected. As their carer, you are the best person to help them keep active because you know them so well.

- Encourage the person to enjoy activities on their own.
- Provide encouragement and reminders.
- Put any equipment in a place where the person can see it and reach it easily.
- Use short sentences when you suggest what to do.

Activities

Knitting

Someone who has been a skilful knitter may still be able to knit squares for a blanket.

Puzzles

Someone who has enjoyed doing crosswords may still enjoy a simple puzzle book.

Social activities

Play cards or board games, or do some gardening or baking together.

Around the home

Men and women alike can enjoy helping with washing and drying up, laying the table or making beds. The end result may not be perfect, but it can give an important sense of achievement.

Music

Even when other abilities are seriously affected, many people still enjoy singing, dancing and listening to music. Ask a friend to help you record a tape of the person's favourite pieces of music or songs for them to listen to.

TV and radio

Many people with dementia enjoy listening to the radio. Television, however, can cause problems. Some people with dementia lose the ability to tell the difference between what is real and what is on screen, and can become distressed. They can also become confused by too much noise. Try watching television together, and choose programmes with small sections of action or humour, rather than a programme with an involved plot. Even a favourite soap opera may become confusing.

In the later stages

As their dementia advances, the person you are caring for will still be able to carry out some tasks that are very familiar to them. However, they will probably be more interested in the process of doing the activity than in the end result.

- Break directions for an activity into small, manageable chunks, and make sure each task is very simple.
- Try to think of activities that have just one step, such as sweeping, dusting or winding wool.

Tips for finding an activity

- Look for activities that are stimulating but that don't involve too many challenges or choices. People with dementia can find it difficult to process options.

- A sense of humour survives in many people with dementia, so look for activities that you will both find entertaining. Having a good laugh will do you both good!
- Dementia often affects people's concentration, so that they can't focus on what they are doing for very long; they may need to do activities in short bursts.
- Dementia can affect a person's motivation, so you may have to help them get started - don't be disheartened.

Sensory stimulation

During the later stages of their dementia, the person you are caring for may have severe difficulties with reasoning and language, but they will still have their sense of taste, touch and smell. Find ways of stimulating these senses.

- As their condition progresses, some people with dementia find comfort in touching or stroking pieces of fabric or cuddly toys.
- Try giving the person a hand massage, using a scented oil such as lavender. This can be very soothing.
- A fish tank, a mobile or a window with a nice view may have a calming effect.

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