

# Activity Ideas

**For folks**

**Caring for someone with dementia**

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## Foreword

The job of caregiver is not easy. It can be tedious and frustrating, and sometimes it seems thankless and overwhelming. And sometimes you simply don't know what to do with your loved one. Yet caregiving can also be a rich and rewarding experience, and it can become the source of some of your fondest memories. This booklet offers ideas for activities that can help bring added meaning and purpose into your daily life and make this time with your loved more joyful for both of you.

Before we begin, here are four important things to keep in mind:

1. Accept your loved one AS IS and try to be as understanding and patient as possible. You would not expect a person who is physically impaired to function like someone with normal physical abilities. Likewise, a person who is cognitively impaired cannot be expected to function like someone with normal mental abilities. Keep in mind that they can't adapt to their disease – but you can.
2. What works today may not work tomorrow. The key is being flexible in your approach and creative with your ideas.
3. Keep your interactions positive and supportive. Be generous with your praise and laughter. Celebrate what is still possible. Make the most of this time you have together.
4. Take care of yourself. Look into respite care programs, adult day care, and in-home health services to give you a break from caregiving. Join a support group to share with other caregivers. Only when you first help yourself can you effectively help and take care of others.

We sincerely hope that you will find some activities in this booklet that will help you enrich this journey. Each situation is unique. Let these ideas be guidelines that you can adapt to your loved one's needs and interests. Also remember that it is the process that counts, not the result. Participation and engagement, to the extent of each person's capabilities, are at the heart of all of these activity ideas.

## Personal Care as an Activity

Most of us perform the personal care activities of our daily routines naturally and easily. We shower, shave, dress, comb our hair, brush our teeth, and go to the bathroom without a second thought. However, people with dementia gradually need more and more help with these activities of daily living (ADL's). It takes them more time to perform these activities, even with help, and it can be tricky to find a balance between giving them enough help and allowing them enough independence. The rule of thumb is: Always be safe, but allow them to do as much as possible for themselves. Talk to them, tell them what you will be doing together, and make it an enjoyable activity. Honor their daily schedule as much as possible and do the ADL's with them at the time that's best for them.

- **Bathing and Showering**—Try both baths and showers to see which one your loved one prefers. It may be different than it was in the past. It may be helpful to purchase a shower seat from a medical equipment company (or you might be able to find one at no charge from a medical equipment lending closet). Gather all the items you will need before starting. Be mindful of water temperatures. Have fun together.
- **Brushing Teeth**—Your loved one will likely be able to brush his or her teeth independently for a long time, but the two of you can brush your teeth together and talk about it. If you don't live together, take a tooth brush to the place where your loved one lives and brush your teeth at the same time. At some point you will probably need to help with some aspect of locating the tooth brush, applying tooth paste, and perhaps even brushing their teeth.
- **Shaving**—Your loved one may enjoy help with shaving even when he doesn't really need it, or he may want to shave independently for as long as possible. Talk about it. Reminisce about old-time barber shops. He might enjoy an old-fashioned, hot-towel shave. Let him be the decision-maker and let him shave as long as he can do so safely.
- **Combing Hair**—Combing each other's hair is an enjoyable activity to do with your loved one. Even if she can do it independently, she might enjoy having you comb her hair, or she might enjoy combing your hair or the children's hair. Again, talk about it, make it fun.
- **Dressing**—Dressing is likely to be one of the first ADL's with which your loved one will need assistance. Perhaps it will begin with help with buttons or a zipper and gradually progress. Getting dressed will also gradually take more time. Don't hurry your loved one; give him or her the assistance needed, but allow the time it takes for as much independence as possible. The selection of clothes can be a delightful source of conversation and interaction.
- **Manicure and Hand Care**—In the early stages of cognitive loss, your loved one might enjoy giving you a manicure. Or she may enjoy having you give her a manicure, or going out for a manicure. Either way, it can be an enjoyable experience for both of you. Talk about the nail filing, the color of the nail polish, how it smells, the process of applying it, and the time it takes to dry. Putting hand cream on each other, gently and carefully, is another enjoyable sensory experience.

## Around the Home

As people with dementia lose their ability to do things independently, they appreciate being able to participate as much as possible in the things they used to do. Everyday activities around the house can provide a sense of being useful and needed.

- Meal Preparation - Let your loved one help as much or as little as cognitive abilities will allow. Snapping beans together can be a fun activity any time, especially if that was something she did when she was younger. Washing fruits or vegetables in a colander, setting the table (or even just carrying the silverware to the table), folding the napkins are all helpful things she, or even he, can do. Ask her advice about how she used to do things. Smell the kitchen spices and talk about them. Away from meal-time, make toast together and talk about what to put on it (keeping in mind dietary requirements, of course!).
- Chores - Dusting, sweeping, and doing laundry are all chores your loved one can help with, and they provide good gentle exercise. Taking care of houseplants, especially misting and watering them, is another activity that you can do together. As the dementia progresses, many of these household chores may become too difficult, but balling socks and folding towels fresh from the dryer, can remain enjoyable activities for a long time.

## Creative Activities

Activities involving the various forms of the arts access creativity and imagination, and these are parts of the brain that are often not affected by dementia. Even those who say they are not creative will find something amongst the artistic activities that touch them deeply and allow them to express themselves. These activities greatly improve quality of life.

- Crafts—Such as beading, making valentines or other greeting cards, and coloring with crayons or markers or watercolors are all activities that can be enjoyed and offer opportunities for creative expression.
- Sculpting—Working with modeling clay or PlayDoh accesses deep memories of making mud pies as a child. Even people who have never worked with clay find this activity very satisfying.
- Playing Musical Instruments—Rhythm bypasses the areas of the brain affected by dementia. Drumming, especially, touches people in a very profound way and simple drumming is easy to do. If you can locate or create a drumming circle your loved one will benefit. Additionally, any instrument your loved one used to play can bring pleasure. If he or she has lost too much coordination to play, listening to someone else play music is also enjoyable.

- Singing—Hearing and singing along with old songs can be especially enjoyable. Songs from your loved one’s youth and early days of marriage may be the ones they relate to the best. Sing a few lines of “Clementine” or “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree” or “Sentimental Journey” and see if your loved one joins in.
- Arranging Flowers—Pick some flowers or bring some home from the grocery store and have your loved one help you arrange them in a vase. (Be sure to cut thorns from roses!) Take your time doing this, talk about it, and make the process enjoyable.
- Wrapping presents together—Even if all they can do is hold the ribbon or the tape, wrapping presents is a creative activity.

This website, The Activity Directors Office, has over 100 ideas for activities

[http://www.theactivitydirectorsoffice.com/Gina\\_ActivityIdeasThatWork\\_Alzheimers.html](http://www.theactivitydirectorsoffice.com/Gina_ActivityIdeasThatWork_Alzheimers.html)

S&S Worldwide (<http://www.ssw.com>) has every craft item you might need.

## Intellectual Activities

Mental stimulation helps to keep your loved one engaged in life. “Use it or lose it” is the old adage, and mental abilities stay sharper if they are exercised. Here are some intellectual activities you can participate in with your loved one.

- Reading the paper and discussing the news.
- Working crossword puzzles.
- Playing word games, either on paper or aloud.
- Reading stories aloud and discussing them.
- Looking at a globe and discussing countries, continents, oceans, etc.
- Putting puzzles together (there is a jigsaw puzzle appropriate for almost every level of cognitive ability).
- For later stages of dementia, sorting playing cards, either by suit or by color.

Books on tape for free: Books Aloud is a national non-profit providing books on tape for disabled individuals <http://www.booksaloud.org>

If you live in a Texas the Texas State Library has a talking book program....

<https://www.tsl.state.tx.us/tbp/index.html>

## Fun and Physical Activities

Having fun and getting physical exercise are important aspects of well being for everyone. Older bodies may not be as strong or flexible as younger ones, but there are still many physical activities that can be enjoyable and beneficial.

- Taking a walk together.
- Doing gentle stretching exercises together.
- Dancing to music your loved one enjoys.
- Batting a balloon.
- Digging in the garden.
- Tossing a beanbag, or several beanbags. This activity activates many areas of the brain and serves as a great way to connect with your loved one.
- Doing range of motion or chair exercises.
- Taking the dog out for a walk in your neighborhood.
- Laughing together.

## Muscle Memory

Muscle memory can best be described as a type of movement with which the muscles become familiar over time. For instance, newborns don't have muscle memory for activities like crawling, scooting or walking. The only way for the muscles to become accustomed to these activities is for the baby to learn how to do these things and then practice them with a great deal of trial and error. Gradually, as the baby becomes a skilled walker, he falls less, is able to balance, and finally is able to incorporate other activities into his life such as running.

Although the precise mechanism of muscle memory is unknown, what is theorized is that anyone learning a new activity, or practicing an old one has significant brain activity during this time. The walking child is gradually building neural pathways that will give the muscles a sense of muscle memory. In other words, even without thinking, the child is soon able to walk, and the muscles are completely accustomed to this process. The child doesn't have to tell the body to walk; the body just knows how to do it, largely because neurons communicate with the muscles and say, "walk now."

Muscle memory thus becomes an unconscious process. The muscles grow accustomed to certain types of movement. This is extremely important in different types of training for sports. The more often you do a certain activity, the more likely you are to do it as needed, when needed. If you've kicked thousands of field goals, exercise physiologists assume that the likelihood of being able to kick one during an American football game is pretty good through muscle memory. You don't have to think, "I need to make this kick." Your body already knows how to do it.

This is one of the reasons that with many activities that involve the body's muscles, like playing an instrument, learning appropriate technique is always stressed. You want your muscle memory to reflect the correct way to do things, not the incorrect way. Your muscle memory can actually play against you if you've constantly been practicing something the wrong way.

Here is a great link to an article on muscle memory, golf and Alzheimer's.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123914598587898813.html>

## Reminiscing

Reminiscing is a much-loved pastime. As you and your loved one reminisce together, recalling special people and revisiting important experiences, this helps to put their life in order. Memories from the distant past are often more vivid than recent memories and can be accessed with some simple techniques and props.

- Looking at a family photo album and talking about the people and places in the photos.
- Reading old letters or greeting cards—Your loved one may have old letters from friends or family members (maybe even old love letters), or you can bring in letters you have. Old birthday cards, Mother’s Day or Father’s Day cards, or other greeting cards are also sources of conversation and reminiscing.
- Doing work-related activities—Organizing and filing papers, sorting coins, looking at vintage pictures of people in his or her occupation (these are readily available for download on the internet), anything that may serve as a reminder of their work or career.
- Tapping into earlier hobbies—You can make a small indoor putting strip for a golfer, look at lures and bait with a fisherman (don’t forget to remove the hooks!), get out the stamp collection, or find a magazine about a favorite hobby and look through it together.
- Looking through an old magazine (such as Life or The Saturday Evening Post), or an old catalog.
- Creating a props bag—Collect vintage items and put them in some kind of bag or box (ideally something that will be meaningful or appealing to your loved one). Old-fashioned clothespins, lacy handkerchiefs (or plain ones for men), scarves, gloves, jewelry, old gadgets from thrift stores, vintage car models—anything to touch and see and hold that might bring back memories and spark some conversation.
- Sitting and chatting about old memories—Talk about your loved ones past, bring up your old memories, and talk about things you saw on the news related to events in his or her life. This can last for five minutes or 30 minutes and can be a source of great pleasure for both of you.
- A Great resource for reminiscing is the magazine Reminisce “The Magazine that Brings Back Good Times” ...You can order it online at [www.reminisce.com](http://www.reminisce.com) or 1-888-859-7838

## Outings

Outings are another fun activity to share together. A trip into the outside world can give you both a change of scenery, provide some exercise, and bring a smile to your loved one's face.

- Taking a leisurely drive around town or out in the country.
- Walking to your neighborhood ice cream shop or bakery and enjoying a treat.
- Driving to a park and then going for a walk or watching kids play in the playground.
- Going to the zoo, public flower garden, to an art show, or to a museum.
- Visiting your church or temple at a quiet time during the week.
- Going to a concert in the park or checking out a Little League baseball game.
- Going out for an early dinner or lunch at a familiar restaurant.

## Social Activities

Social interaction is a pleasurable and needed activity for most of us. Your loved one may not have the stamina for a long social event, but there are many activities that can still work well.

- Having a tea party or a coffee get-together.
- Visiting a friend or inviting a friend for a visit.
- Playing card games, board games, dominoes, Rummikub, or any other favorite game—In the early stages of dementia many people enjoy bridge if they used to play it. You can play card games that are more and more simple as time goes on, games like Old Maid or Crazy Eights.
- Playing Bingo—Lots of people love this game. It doesn't involve as much social interaction as many other games, but it can be played with very large groups.
- Attending a family birthday party—Your loved one may enjoy being with family members, eating ice cream and cake, and playing games. Just be mindful of time and don't push them past their stamina level.
- Sharing a message from another loved one, or news of marriages, births, vacations, distant relatives, old acquaintances or children of acquaintances.

## Soothing, Quiet Time Together

People with dementia can sometimes feel agitation due to over-stimulation. When this happens, soothing, quiet activities can help restore comfort and peace. They are also good for overall wellbeing and can be a welcome addition to every day.

- Petting a dog or a cat.
- Listening to classical music.
- Bird watching.
- Drinking a glass of warm milk together.
- Sitting in rocking chairs together.
- Watching a sunrise or a sunset.
- Sitting by a lake or a beach, or sitting in a beautiful garden.
- Sitting on the couch together and holding hands.

This article has great information on the use of IPODS for those with Alzheimer's

“Dr. Tomaino says she frequently sees dementia patients make gains in cognitive function after music therapy. In one unpublished study she led a few years ago, with funding from the New York State Department of Health, 45 patients with mid- to late-stage dementia had one hour of personalized music therapy, three times a week, for 10 months, and improved their scores on a cognitive-function test by 50% on average. One patient in the study recognized his wife for the first time in months.”

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704538404574540163096944766.html>

The Institute for Music and Neurological Function “IMNF” ([imnf.org](http://imnf.org)) has a list of songs that are the 10 most recognizable for music therapy and those with Alzheimer's, they can be found at this link:

<http://www.imnf.org/imnfsite.php/services/category/top-10s-for-memory>

## Spiritual Activities

If your loved one was active in church, synagogue, or other religious institution earlier in life, or if faith has been an important part of their life, continuing with spiritual activities will be meaningful and valuable.

- Reading a daily devotional together.
- Praying together.
- Singing hymns or gospel songs together.
- Reading the Bible (or other Holy Book) together.
- Going to church or other place of worship together.
- Inviting a minister, priest, rabbi, or other religious leader to come for a visit.
- Listening openly to your loved one talk about his or her spiritual beliefs and being supportive and encouraging.

## Other Web sites of interest

Caring.com has a page with ideas for activities <http://tinyurl.com/7a7ljks>

## References

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