



## Activities at Home for People with Dementia

### The Importance of Activities

When considering activities for people with dementia it is important to define what we mean by activities. Activities take many forms and represent different facets of our lives. Although special events and recreational activities are enjoyable and important, it is our day-to-day activities that define us, enhance our self-esteem and give purpose to our lives.

Activities also provide a structure for the daily lives of people with dementia but they need help organizing their day. Activities enable them to retain their life skills and learn some new ones. Activities done with a carer in the home or with others in a day care centre provide opportunities for social interaction. Providing an occupation and an outlet for energy, activities may help lessen anxiety or boredom and consequent behaviour such as rummaging in drawers or pacing around.

***If we think of activities only as outings, visits or hobbies, but we can overlook the importance of ensuring that people with dementia experience meaningful occupation as part of their everyday lives.***

To ensure activities are suited to a person with dementia the following factors should be considered:

### The Person

What are the person's likes and dislikes, abilities and past interests? Is the person able to initiate activities independently? Is the person physically able to do an activity? Does the person have sight, hearing, or perceptual problems that might significantly affect his/her capacity to undertake an activity? Over time dementia does affect a person's confidence, intellect, memory, ability to think logically and ability to understand and process language.

### The Activity

It is important to make activities for the person with dementia part of the daily routine. The person with dementia can do a variety of tasks (see List of Household Tasks). It does not matter if the task is not completed properly. If the table is not fully set or the towels are not folded neatly, a carer can discreetly make adjustments later. What matters is that the person with dementia feels a sense of inclusion in the tasks being done. As dementia progresses it may be necessary to change the tasks to simpler and more repetitive ones.

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## **Carer Input**

A carer has an important role in prompting the person to do an activity. A carer can break an activity into small manageable parts, assist with difficult parts of a task, and offer encouragement. A person with dementia may respond positively if a specific request for help is made – “Would you please stir this for me?” or “Please sweep the floor” (while handing a brush to the person). If a carer shares an activity with the person with dementia it provides an opportunity for social contact and conversation.

Some activities provide opportunities for moderate exercise e.g. standing up to dry dishes, sweeping the floor or sweeping the path. The approach of the carer needs to be flexible and realistic; criticism and correction should be avoided.

## **The Environment**

A person with dementia may become uncomfortable, frightened, or confused by the environment if it is too hot or too cold, if it is noisy, or if there are too many people around.

A person with dementia may be distracted by background noise from a radio or TV.

Ensure the person with dementia uses materials that are safe, e.g. non-toxic paints and avoid sharp tools. The environment can be used to stimulate activities. Indoors, items such as photo albums and old magazines, cards etc can be used for activities as well as household items. Outdoors, light gardening and bird tables can generate activities.

## **Different Kinds of Activities**

People with dementia participate in routine activities of personal care and eating and drinking but many may not have the opportunity of helping with household tasks, or undertaking intellectual, spiritual or creative activities. Many do not have the opportunity of taking enough exercise. If they spend too much time sitting, dozing or watching television all day it may cause them to be restless and wakeful at night. If possible carers should vary activities from day to day.

## **General Home Tasks**

General household tasks can provide a variety of activities for the person with dementia. The person may have previously enjoyed household tasks and may feel more useful if encouraged to do some simple ones. The person might not previously have participated in household tasks,

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or might not have enjoyed them, but would enjoy tasks like watering plants, arranging flowers or feeding pets or birds.

It is important to think creatively and adapt the task to fit the ability level of the person. Some people with dementia would be unable to use an electric vacuum cleaner but might find it easy to use a lightweight carpet sweeper.

Some tasks, which are usually done standing up e.g. drying dishes, might be done sitting down.

Avoid giving too much supervision and direction. If the person is criticized and corrected he/she will become reluctant to engage in the activity again.

If the floor has to be swept again it can be done later to avoid drawing attention to a task that has not been done properly.

Some tasks such as washing and drying dishes or folding sheets can be joint activities and can promote conversation and social contact. Many people with dementia can miss out on the experience of sharing activities with their carers or members of their extended family.

#### Examples of Tasks at Home

- Cleaning a window (water with wiper)
- Hand washing small items e.g. socks
- Hanging out the washing
- Folding sheets/towels (with help)
- Sorting/matching socks
- Dusting
- Sweeping/mopping floor
- Using carpet sweeper
- Polishing brass or silver
- Re-organising food cupboard
- Setting/clearing the table
- Washing/drying dishes
- Tidying drawers
- Arranging flowers
- Watering plants/window boxes
- Feeding pets
- Stocking a bird table
- Making a shopping list

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***It is important to focus on the benefit of exercise and occupation to the person and the sense of achievement and inclusion that the person can derive from participating in a household activity even if the person can do the task for only a few minutes at a time once or twice a day.***

### **Daily Routines**

- Personal care activities: bathing, showering, shaving and dressing.
- Mealtime activities: preparing food, cooking, eating and drinking
- Household Tasks: dusting, sweeping, cleaning worktops, washing.

### **Other Activities**

- Physical: taking a walk, dancing, and light gardening.
- Social: having tea/coffee, attending a family gathering, talking or playing cards or bingo, reminiscing with a friend or neighbour
- Intellectual: reading a book or magazine or doing a crossword puzzle
- Spiritual: praying, listening to religious service, singing a hymn.
- Creative: painting, using pottery clay, playing musical instrument, creating a Life Story book with family help.
- Relaxing: resting, looking out the window, petting an animal, having a foot bath or hand message
- Spontaneous: going on a picnic or visiting friends.

### **Sorting Items**

When we sort we use our senses of sight, touch and memory. If dementia has affected the perceptual, organizational and logical skills of a person, sorting in a systematic way might be too challenging. However, it might still be possible for them to enjoy the visual and tactile experience of picking items up and exploring and rearranging them. The person may also enjoy talking about the items.

### **Favourite Radio and TV Programmes**

People with dementia will enjoy some radio and television programmes, particularly in the early stages of the illness. Favourite programmes of music, nature, sport etc can be taped on video and shown repeatedly. It is important to remember that a person with dementia loses the ability to follow the story lines of many of the "soap operas" or new documentaries; it is unlikely that watching TV will continue to be enjoyable. At a certain stage some people with dementia may lose their ability to recognize familiar objects and may develop perceptual problems.

They may become frightened, confused and disturbed by violent or noisy programmes.

### **Activities for Later Stages of Dementia**

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These activities may be undertaken at any time but are particularly relevant in later stages of dementia. Sensory stimulation given with affection and gentleness will be enjoyed even if the person cannot respond verbally and is not physically active. Some ideas include:

- Listening to familiar music
- Listening to favourite books or poetry collections being read
- Having prayers said
- Looking at family photographs
- Watching babies or young children or animals
- Smelling flowers
- Eating small tasty treats
- Feeling a variety of different fabrics, objects and soft toys.

Personal care activities that involve touching such as gentle brushing of hair, using a foot spa and having a neck or hand massage with scented oils or lotions are also soothing and comforting to a person with dementia.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The suggestions contained in this article are intended to help both carers and people with dementia. Many principal carers may feel overwhelmed by their caring role and the scope of their family, employment and/or household duties.

It may not be possible for some to implement many of the suggestions here. However, it may be possible to occasionally arrange for other family members, including grandchildren, or friends and neighbours to participate in an activity with the person with dementia.

The activities of our lives provide us with opportunities for expressing ourselves, experiencing a sense of identity, a sense of inclusion in life tasks, a sense of contributing to others, comfort, fun and enjoyment, as well as meeting our need for occupation.

We all have deep psychological needs that are met through engaging in a variety of activities, alone and with others.

***They do not diminish with the onset of dementia, but people with dementia need help in having these needs met.***

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