

Stimulation for Alzheimer's sufferers

Introduction

Alzheimer's Disease is a terribly crippling disease to the sufferer. It robs the person of his/her personhood and life. It gradually takes away the person's personality, spontaneity, initiative, enthusiasm and general zest for life. Sufferers tend to retreat more and more into their own world and withdraw from their usual activities and ongoings in the environment around them. Sufferers also present with challenging behaviours and symptoms including agitation, aggression, wandering, anxiety and depression. Many carers of Alzheimer sufferers are faced with the problem of 'what to do' with their loved ones. What suitable activities can be used to keep the sufferers stimulated?

Included in this article is the use of activities as stimulation

- Definition of an activity
- Why use activities
- Values / aims of activities
- Guidelines for planning activities
- List of possible activities to use

Activities

Definition of an Activity:

Use of one's physical and mental abilities, time, energy, attention and interest in order to achieve a pre determined goal.

Activities are an integral part of our daily existence and give meaning to our lives.

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Why activities?

- A tool to help us relate to residents
- A tool to give residents' senses information
- A tool for assessing their abilities – understand residents better and help them do what they are still capable of doing
- Improve the elderly's quality of life
- Maintain / improve function
- Help to socially integrate the person
- Improve mental and physical status
- Activities play a significant part in the prevention and intervention of challenging behaviours.

Values / Aims of activities with Dementia / Alzheimer Residents

- Evaluation functioning
- Provide socialisation and interaction with others
- Allow residents to experience pleasure and satisfaction
- Improve long term and short term memory
- Improve concentration and attention
- Improve motivation
- Improve self esteem and feelings of competency
- Improve awareness of abilities
- Decrease feelings of stress and anxiety
- Provides opportunities to express and explore feelings
- Promote independence
- Promote sensory stimulation
- Include physical aspects (co-ordination, motor planning)

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Remember these guidelines when planning activities

- Activities should draw on remaining abilities and knowledge
- Select activities which provide cognitive and sensory stimulation and those which entertain
- Choose activities which involve very few steps and lead the patient through them one by one
- Try to avoid activities that the patient perceives as childish but keep in mind that as the disease advances, children's picture books and games may be used.
- Be creative in devising activities and remember that what works today, may not work tomorrow
- Don't feel that you have to keep the patient busy all day
- But don't shy away from giving the patient "busy work" if it calms them down and occupies their time.
- Activities must have a meaning to the person
- Activities should be done at a time to suit the person's best level of functioning
- Prepare a safe work area. Ensure it is uncluttered with a minimum of distractions and noise
- Activities should re-establish old roles. – Make use of habitual, over learned tasks (cooking, gardening, etc.)

*“Try to focus
on
familiar
skills or
tasks
”*

Therefore, when doing tasks together

- Try to focus on familiar skills or tasks
- Give simple choices, where possible. Don't tell person what to do
- Allow time to respond
- Repeat instructions exactly the same way
- Break down the task into small steps
- Modify the steps as the person becomes more impaired
- Praise sincerely for success.

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Types of Activities

Sensory Stimulation Activities – smell, sight, touch, taste, hearing, body parts (hand, neck and foot massage, brushing hair, smelling fresh flowers or pot pourri pillows, using essential oils and fragrances, the aroma of freshly cooked apples, stroking an animal, the aroma of bees wax or floor polish)

Self-care and life skills activities – bathing, eating, dressing, toileting, grooming, baking, walking, TV, music, working with money.

Physical exercise –(improves cognitive ability) combined with music, slow and deep breathing, touch and massage. Kicking, throwing, catching, bouncing balls, balloons, beanbags

- Skittles, carpet bowls
- Dancing, walking to music

Social interaction - reminiscence, photographs, pre-war music, singing, dancing, parties, games, outings, picnics, working together on a task.

Music as Activity

- play old tunes (e.g. from the war years, Frank Sinatra etc.)
- play classical music
- play seasonal or holiday music
- play religious music (e.g. church hymns)

Reading / Current Affairs – having newspaper, poems, humorous snippets read to them.

Simple Art & Craft

- drawing, painting, colouring in cutting and pasting onto a collage,
- potato printing
- knitting, crochet
- adult colouring books
- soft clay for moulding (non-toxic)
- seasonal decorations (e.g. Christmas decorations)

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Sorting Activities

- buttons, beads, envelopes
- give them a basket of towels and socks to sort out
- match socks
- sort pens and pencils

Cognitive games

- - games with words – opposites, spelling, end familiar sayings, general knowledge
- - games with numbers – dominoes (floor dominoes are big with pictures)
- - table games – snap, snakes and ladders, card games
- - games with letters – scrabble, jumbled alphabet
- - memory games – matching cards, tray, colours

Psychosocial Activities

- caring for a pet
- doing something for others
- preparing for a part, cleaning up

Normalisation Activities

domestic duties – folding washing, separating socks, peeling vegetables, cooking, baking, gardening, washing and drying up, dusting, sweeping, wiping tables, caring for pets, sorting items
flower arranging, putting plastic lids with correct containers

Conclusion

These are just a few ideas that, as an occupational therapist, I have found to work. Try to find which of these work for you and your loved ones. Use your creativity.

Remember: what works today might not work tomorrow and vice-versa, so, keep on trying.

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