Activities

For People Living with Dementia



Alzheimer National Helpline
1800 341 341

This factsheet provides information to support families to help a person living with dementia to continue to enjoy activities in and around the home. Activities can enhance our self- esteem, help us to engage with the world around us and give meaning to our lives.

Activities can provide stimulation and variety and can help people who are living with dementia to remain engaged and included in the world around them. Activities may be structured but may also emerge from day-to-day tasks in and around the home. When organising activities for someone living with dementia, consider the following:

- Involving the person with dementia in planning and organising activities can improve self-esteem and self-worth and overall wellbeing.
- You may need to adapt tasks to reflect a person's ability so that they are able to feel included and able to participate. For example, a person may struggle to cook a complex meal independently, but they may enjoy and be able to assist with preparing meals.
- As dementia progresses a person may appear to lose interest in activities and this may occur due to low confidence as well as cognitive and memory problems. Explore ways of adapting an activity to the needs and ability of an individual. Physical challenges such as poor eyesight or arthritis may impact on ability as well as changes in energy levels, and cognitive function.
- Focusing on what the person can do rather than what they cannot can help to improve confidence, satisfaction and sense of achievement which can reduce feelings of frustration and dependence. For example, if a person has always enjoyed reading but appears to struggle as dementia progresses, an audio book might be an appropriate alternative.

How activities can help

- Activities can help people maintain skills and encourage independence.
- Activities can provide interest or fun and help increase confidence and to feel more engaged in what is going on around them.
- Some activities such as painting a picture or looking at old photograph's may help people with dementia to express their feelings, so be sensitive to non-verbal communication such as body language and facial expressions.
- Activities can relieve boredom and frustration and help a person to sleep well at night.
- Sharing an enjoyable activity may help you find new ways to connect with the person with dementia and bring you closer together.



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Tips to remember

- Simple activities are often the best, particularly as dementia progresses. Look for those which provide stimulation, but avoid too many challenges or choices as these can be confusing for the person with dementia.
- When planning activities in and around the home, try to make sure that activities chosen are those that the person with dementia is likely to enjoy and be able to engage in.
- People with dementia often retain their sense of humour. Look for opportunities to share a good laugh.
- Consider the time of day and the routine of the person with dementia when planning activities. People with dementia may become tired quickly, so be prepared to vary the length and complexity of tasks.
- In the later stages of dementia you may need to think about brief activities that break up the day and provide contact with the person, such as a hand massage or listening to music.

For more information about activities in the later stages of dementia call our **National Helpline on 1800 341 341.**

Some suggestions for activities:

Exercise

- A walk in the fresh air each day, if possible, can be an enjoyable form of exercise and stimulation. Exercising to music is another good way of keeping fit and often helps to improve people's mood.
- Look out for gentle exercise classes in your local community, such as social clubs and day care services provided by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland. Alternatively, if you both like dancing, clear a space and try dancing to some favourite tunes. The person may well remember the steps and be delighted to have retained this ability. If not, you can improvise.
- Games such as playing with a ball or balloon can provide exercise and fun if approached in a light-hearted way.

Music

- Music stimulates different parts of the brain and can help someone with dementia to express feelings and connect with past and present experiences. You might record some favourite pieces for the person to listen to while you are not there. Popular songs from the person's younger days are often appreciated. They may like to sing along with the words or you may like to sing together.

Out and about

- A walk in the park, a cup of tea in a café, a visit to a garden centre or to a local museum, for example, can provide contact with other people as well as a change of scene and a focal point for conversation. Some libraries and galleries offer 'dementia friendly' tours and activities which provide extra time, space and support to enable people living with dementia to enjoy art and exhibitions.

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Pets and animals

- Many people with dementia respond well to animals, particularly if they had a pet earlier in their lives. Cats and dogs they can stroke are especially suitable. If you do not have a pet you might encourage a neighbour or friend to bring one in from time to time.

Television and technology

- People living with dementia often enjoy watching favourite television programmes – however it may be difficult to focus on long and unfamiliar shows. When putting on the television check with the person to see if they are interested and appear to enjoy the programme. Musicals and movies from a person's earlier life may be enjoyed and if you are able to tape favourite shows, you can pause them at regular intervals to talk about the programme and check that the person is still engaged.
- Other forms of technology such as touch screen tablets may provide alternative means of stimulation and entertainment. Younger family members in particular may enjoy showing relatives interesting features such as digital photographs, games and video calls to loved ones.

Reminiscence therapy / Reminders of the past

People with dementia may find it easier to remember events that happened when they were younger rather than the more recent past. You may find that a person with dementia responds positively when discussing early happy memories. Ways of reminiscing include:

- Looking through old photographs or mementos of their life, such as birth and marriage certificates, medals or awards, old invitations or postcards.
- Clothes, shoes or bags that have been kept for many years can spark off memories as can treasured possessions or a 'rummage box' items from a person's past that have meaning for them. All the family can help to create a rummage box.
- Looking at pictures in books about subjects that are of particular interest such as old cars, former film stars or places they have visited. You can borrow books from your local library.

Life Story Book

The Life Story Book contains photographs and short stories about a person's life that can be used by family, friends and carers to connect with the person living with dementia. This activity is best done by working with the person living with dementia – by talking about favourite memories and experiences you can collate stories and happy memories into a book that can be used to reminisce from time to time.

Sensory stimulation

Activities which involve the senses can help a person living with dementia to communicate and engage in non-verbal ways. This may be particularly helpful if a person is unable to express their thoughts and feelings verbally – although sensory activities are often enjoyable for everyone.

- Touching or stroking soft pieces of fabric or a cuddly toy can often provide comfort. A gentle hand massage can give reassuring contact.
- Tasting flavours enjoyed in the past such as old fashioned sweets or distinctive foods or drinks can bring back memories.
- Smelling flowers or perfume or distinctive smells such as ground coffee, essential oils or fresh bread can give pleasure.
- Listening to different kinds of music can be relaxing or stimulating, depending on the choice.
- A pleasant view, a hanging mobile or a goldfish tank can provide a focus of interest and be calming.

Other ideas – be creative!

The suggestions in this factsheet are a small selection of possible activities for people living with dementia. Other activities such as gardening, knitting, and even household tasks such as folding laundry can provide opportunities for fun and engaging activity.

By making adjustments and taking a positive approach, even a few minutes of activity can make a difference to someone living with dementia. You may be surprised to see how much someone with dementia is able to do with a little encouragement, a few adaptations and a good dose of creativity.

For more information and suggestions or to talk to someone about activities you can contact our National Helpline on 1800 341 341.

The Alzheimer Society of Ireland (ASI)

ASI have a range of information including our factsheets on

- Engaging in Activities in the home,
- Life Story Book, Memory/Conversation Box, Sorting and Tidying

We also provide a range of dementia specific services such as Dementia Advisors, Day Care, Home Care and Support Groups.

Freephone: 1800 341 341

Email: helpline@alzheimer.ie

Visit/Live Chat: www.alzheimer.ie

Notes

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