

PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITIES FOR DEMENTIA

CHAPTER 1

PURPOSEFUL ENGAGEMENT AND PERSON-CENTRED CARE

Engagement in activities that are purposeful has many benefits. It encourages us to feel good about ourselves, brings meaning to our lives, helps us to feel a sense of belonging, provides opportunities for using our skills and generally supports our well-being.

The benefits of purposeful engagement do not change with a diagnosis of dementia.

People living with dementia can engage in purposeful activities at home and in social groups such as planned activity groups.

To support engagement, it is important to know the person behind the dementia.

This is what person-centred care is all about and requires knowledge about a person's life story and what strengths and interests they have to create activities that are purposeful to them.

Montessori is an example of a person-centred approach to supporting purposeful engagement. Many of the activities in the video Purposeful activities for dementia are based on this approach.

People with dementia can have difficulty showing their feelings. This can make it challenging to know if an activity has purpose and meaning for them. Laughing and having fun are obvious signs of meaningful engagement. Quietly watching others who are involved in an activity or helping other people are also signs a person is meaningfully engaged.

Walking away, refusing to join in or falling asleep can signal that a person with dementia is not engaged.

The person with dementia should always determine which activities have meaning to them and which ones do not. Engagement is about the experience of being involved in activity that brings purpose and meaning - not the outcome.

KEY MESSAGES

- Engagement in meaningful activity supports the independence, choice and well-being of people living with dementia.
- People with dementia engage in activity that is meaningful to them in different ways.
- The person with dementia determines what is meaningful to them.

REFLECTION

Think about a time you recently observed a person with dementia was engaged in an activity:

- Why do you think they engaged in the activity?
- How do you know the activity was meaningful to them?
- Did you observe anything that helped them to be engaged?
- In what ways do you think the person benefited from the experience?

To create opportunities for people living with dementia to engage in activities that are meaningful to them requires an understanding about their life story – what are their interests, what's important to them, what they're proud of and what makes their day?

To learn about a person's life story you can talk directly with the person with dementia, their carers and others providing support. Carers can provide valuable insights, so speaking to them can help you piece together a person's life story. Make your own observations too.

Everyone needs to work together to learn about and use what is known about a person with dementia to create opportunities for engagement in purposeful activity.

This might include:

- interests, both past and present
- leisure activities they enjoy
- achievements they are proud of
- significant roles throughout their life
- things likely to trigger negative responses
- what comforts them
- what they like to talk about
- what is important to them
- what makes their day
- their goals.

Whenever you learn something new about a person share the information with everyone involved in supporting the person at home and within social groups.

A team approach helps to provide a positive emotional environment that encourages engagement. This includes the person living with dementia, their carers and support staff.

KEY MESSAGES

- Knowing the person behind the dementia is necessary for supporting engagement in purposeful activity.
- Knowing key aspects of the person's life story can help you develop interesting and meaningful opportunities for engagement.
- The person living with dementia, their carers and friends can help you find out about the person's life story.
- A team approach to sharing key information about life stories is important.

REFLECTION

- How is information about life stories shared? Consider everyone, including the person with dementia, carers and staff.
- What do you do to encourage people to share this information?
- What aspects of privacy and confidentiality need to be considered?

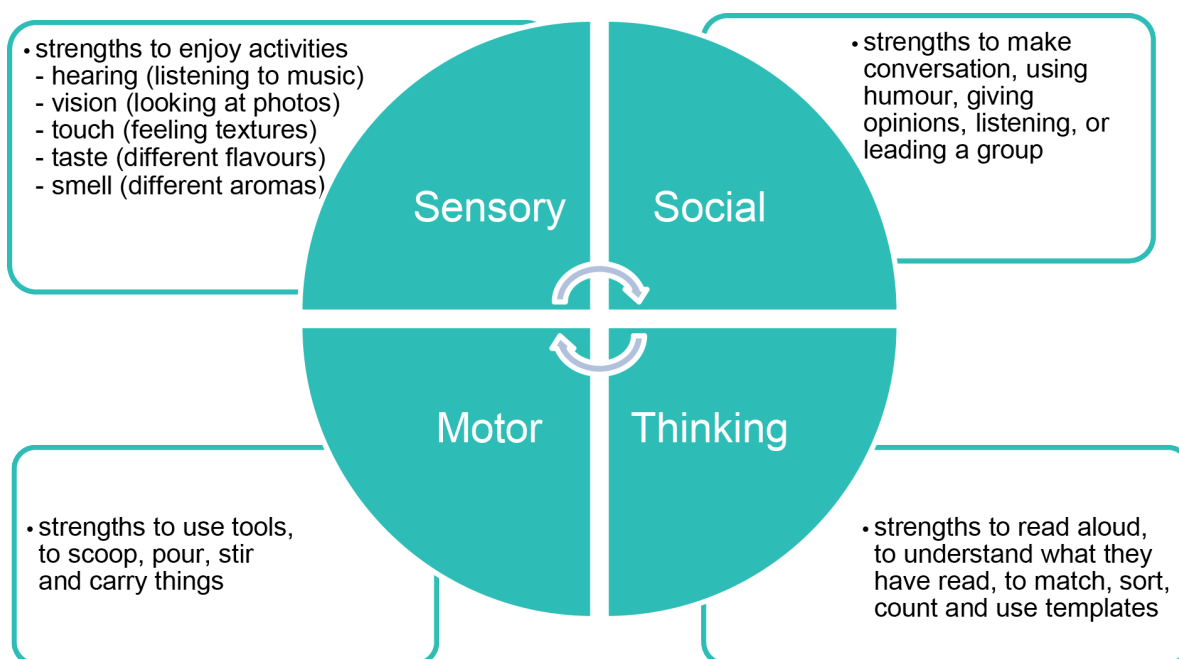
We regularly hear about the things that people living with dementia can no longer do. By taking the time to learn about people we can uncover the skills and abilities they still have.

As dementia progresses, the memory a person has for routines, habits and skills such as reading can be retained for longer. This area of memory is known as **procedural memory**.

Declarative memory refers to memories of recent events, facts and where things are. This area of memory tends to be damaged earlier in dementia.

To provide opportunities for activities at home and in social groups that use and maintain a person's strengths may require providing support for memory that is more impaired.

Personal strengths can be grouped into four main areas:



When identifying a person's strengths, it's important that the person does not feel like they are being tested or under any pressure.

Simple observation can be an effective way to get information about a person's skills. More than one skill can be observed at the same time, because sensory, motor, social and thinking strengths all interact with each other.

Morning tea can offer a great opportunity to observe both motor and social skills. Can the person socialise? Can they carry things and serve others? Can they scoop, pour and stir?

The information can help to identify roles that a person can undertake wherever they are.

Developing personalised activities that use a person's strengths can help them maintain skills and independence. Their self-esteem and wellbeing is supported when they engage in activities where they are likely to succeed.

KEY MESSAGES

- Consider what people with dementia can do, rather than what they can no longer do.
- There are different types of strengths – sensory, motor, social, thinking.
- Knowing about strengths helps to create activities that people living with dementia can succeed doing.

REFLECTION

- What are some of the ways you can discover and learn about the strengths and abilities of a person with dementia?
- What are some of the things that have surprised you in what a person with dementia can still do?
- How might you use knowledge about a person's abilities to create meaningful activities for the individual or as part of a group?

A person's declarative memory – memory for facts, events, finding our way and putting things in order – is often damaged early in dementia. There are many ways to modify both the physical and emotional environments to support a person living with dementia to be independent and engage in meaningful activity.

The physical environment:

- make sure you have good lighting
- eliminate unnecessary noise
- use contrasting colours to help people perceive different surfaces and spot boundaries
- clear signage can reduce confusion and anxiety about what day it is, what's happening today and where important things are located.

The emotional environment:

- positive relationships and a warm, relaxed environment are important for supporting meaningful engagement.

Ensuring supportive physical and emotional environments requires an understanding of other health issues and the impact that different types of dementia can have. Vision or hearing deficits, pain, tiredness and limited mobility can affect a person's ability to participate in activities.

Different types of dementia affect people differently and will influence the strengths and abilities people have.

Dementia is progressive and people's support needs can change over time meaning that adjustments to the support that people living as dementia require also changes.

KEY MESSAGES

- A supportive environment is necessary to encourage people with dementia to engage in activities that are meaningful to them.
- The environment includes both physical surroundings and the relationships between everyone involved in supporting the person with dementia – carers, staff, friends, volunteers and others.
- The environment can support independence, decision-making, function and memory.

REFLECTION

- What changes could you make to the physical environment to encourage engagement in meaningful activities?
- How can all people involved, work together to create a supportive emotional environment that encourages engagement?
- How can all people involved work together to share experiences, achievements and goals at home and in the social group?

Information about a person's life story, their strengths and their support requirements, can be used to create meaningful activities that are tailored to suit specific needs and desires.

The home and social group environments can provide opportunities to create activities that the person living with dementia can do both on their own and with others.

Having a meaningful role can help people to feel they are doing something worthwhile. Roles also give people an opportunity to use their skills. It's important to know that the person has the ability to carry out the role before inviting them to do so.

Roles or tasks that people with living dementia can do on include setting the table, preparing morning tea, clearing up after a meal or hanging out and folding the washing.

Intergenerational activities both in the home and in social groups provide wonderful opportunities for people living with dementia to engage in meaningful activities. This can include listening to children read, telling stories and sharing experiences and skills.

Social groups can partner with a local school or playgroup to create opportunities for sharing activities with younger members of the community.

In the home, there are many opportunities to share activities with younger members of the family or community.

Smaller group activities based on the interests that people share can support the independence and decision-making skills of people living with dementia.

KEY MESSAGES

- Use knowledge of each person to create activities that reflect their interests and strengths.
- Identify interests and strengths that people have in common to create shared activities.
- Meaningful roles support self-esteem, identity and purpose.

REFLECTION

- What interests are shared by people within your social group?
- How might you use knowledge about shared interests to develop shared activities?
- What roles can be undertaken by the person with dementia within the social group and at home?
- What opportunities can you create for a person living with dementia to engage in activities with children or younger people?
- How can you work together to achieve goals that are important to the person with dementia?

The ways in which activities are presented can affect a person's ability to engage. Knowing the person can help to decide how to present or modify activities to better support people.

The important things to consider when presenting activities include:

- remove any distractions including clutter and unnecessary noise from the immediate area
- have all the required items in one place and close at hand
- where possible establish boundaries for the activity
- invite the person to join in the activity
- break tasks into smaller steps
- use a template if required (i.e. setting the table)
- start by demonstrating how to do the activity
- give the person something to hold
- thank the person for their help, ask if they enjoyed it and if they would like to do it again.

When presenting activities, it's important to provide choices so people can independently select the activity they prefer. Different activities can all be offered at the same time.

KEY MESSAGES

- Inviting a person to engage in activities and thanking them afterwards supports choice and independence.
- People with dementia can engage in activities in different ways and at different levels.
- Activity stations offer opportunities for people to independently engage in activities.

REFLECTION

- What challenges might you experience supporting a person living with dementia to maintain interest in a shared activity? How might you respond?
- Provide an example of a task or activity you can break down into smaller steps.
- How might you present activities in a way that encourages choice and autonomy for a person living with dementia?
- What are examples of activity stations you might create within your home or social group?

CONCLUSION

Each person living with dementia is unique. As we get to know and understand each person behind the dementia, opportunities for engagement that encourage feelings of achievement and self-worth, support connections with others and give purpose to everyday life can be created.

Engagement in purposeful activity is important for everyone and this need certainly doesn't change when a person is diagnosed with dementia.

Participating in meaningful activities helps us feel good about ourselves, supports wellbeing and independence and gives purpose to our lives.

When the person with dementia, their carers and staff work together, they will discover many ways to support engagement at home and in social groups.