

Activities

This help sheet describes the importance of activities for people with dementia and tips for planning.

Dementia can affect a person's ability to think, remember and communicate. People's abilities can vary greatly, but staying involved and active in the things they enjoy is important.

Activities can help maintain communication and social engagement, and support living positively with dementia.

Many people will continue to engage in meaningful activities independently by developing and using strategies, routines and support to meet their needs.

Some people may need your help to work out how to continue doing things they enjoy. Rather than giving up hobbies, interests or activities that are becoming challenging, it may be possible to modify those activities or take up new ones.

Support from family, carers and friends can be of great assistance. Allied health professionals, such as an occupational therapist, can also assist in planning and adapting activities.

Tips to help you plan activities

Aim for activities that:

- maintain the person's skills
- compensate for any activities they can no longer do
- promote self-esteem and empower them
- stimulate the mind and encourage new learning
- provide enjoyment, pleasure and social contact
- are sensitive to a person's cultural background.

Consider what makes the person unique:

- former lifestyle
- work history and skills
- hobbies

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- recreational and social interests
- travel experiences
- significant life events.

Activities can be pleasurable and relaxing

It is important to keep enjoying anything which makes life meaningful, or that is pleasurable or relaxing.

Many people enjoy creative hobbies such as playing a musical instrument, knitting or painting. Others enjoy social contact, so keep this up as much as possible.

A person with dementia may enjoy an outing even if they may not remember where they have been. What is important is that the moment is enjoyed.

Simple and unhurried activities that are meaningful are best

When you are doing an activity:

- give the person the time and space they need to enjoy activities at their own pace
- focus on one thing at a time
- break down activities into simple, manageable steps
- communicate one instruction at a time.

Prepare a safe activities area

People who are living with dementia often have difficulty with visual perception and coordination.

It will help to:

- keep surfaces clear, with few distractions
- reduce distracting noise
- arrange good lighting, without glare
- arrange individual seat preferences
- ensure correct work heights
- consider using plastic containers to avoid breakages.

Keep activities positive

You might be surprised which activities work well. Any simple activity can be a positive experience. Try not to rule anything out before giving it a chance.

Some tips to consider:

- A person's abilities can fluctuate from day to day. If an activity isn't enjoyable or doesn't go well, modify it, or try again another time.
- If they are not interested in joining the activity, leave it for another time.
- Help start the activity and then do it together.
- Activities can be short or long: they may only last five minutes.
- Doing nothing together can actually be doing something.
- Consider keeping a photo diary of the person's involvement in enjoyable activities, that you and they can look through.

Choose the best time of day

When planning activities, consider the times of day the person is at their best.

For example, sometimes it's best to walk in the morning or early afternoon. But for people who are restless later in the day, it may be better to try a late afternoon walk.

Be aware of surroundings

Some people with dementia find that being among large groups of people can be overwhelming. If this is the case, avoid crowds, constant movement and noise.

Create an emotional outlet

Activities can prompt positive feelings or recall treasured memories.

You could try:

- singing favourite songs together or making individual recordings
- arranging visits with pets

- including babies, children or young adults in the activity
- looking through old photos, memorabilia and favourite books
- finding picture books and magazines on subjects that interest the person.

Include sensory experiences

Enjoyable sensory experiences are:

- hand, neck and foot massages
- using fragrant essential oils
- brushing someone's hair
- stroking a pet, or different textured materials
- smelling fresh flowers, herbs or pot pourri
- visiting a herb garden or flower show
- looking through a rummage box of things special to the person
- listening to favourite music.

Movement and rhythm are often retained longer than most abilities

To get moving, you could:

- hire an exercise bike or walking machine
- watch or be part of dance or exercise classes
- join a walking group or walk a dog together
- go for a swim.

Outdoor activities allow the person to enjoy being outside, while getting much-needed exercise.

Consistency is important

If different people are caring for the person living with dementia, it can be helpful to create an activity care plan.

This will ensure that activities are consistent and suited to the person's individual needs.

Engaging someone who has changed behaviours

It is important to know what helps to calm or divert a person when they are restless or distressed. This information can be particularly helpful for support and respite workers and could be noted in a care plan.

Be encouraging

Someone can live positively with dementia, despite challenges that may be faced along the way. Mistakes can happen, so be reassuring. Encourage the person to keep trying and engaging in activities that give them purpose, pleasure and relaxation. It is also important to encourage activities that provide mental stimulation and promote better health and wellbeing.

Additional reading and resources

- Tips to assist with social engagement help sheets:
Visit: dementia.org.au/help-sheets
- Dementia Australia support
Visit: dementia.org.au/support
- Dementia Australia library service
Visit: dementia.org.au/library
- Dementia Australia education
Visit: dementia.org.au/education

Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

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Visit our website: dementia.org.au