

24 HOUR
Dementia
Helpline
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Activities

a guide for carers of
people with dementia



With thanks to the Alzheimer Scotland Kilmarnock Dementia Resource Centre.
Photography by Lewis J Houghton.

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Making sure nobody faces dementia alone.

About activities

Activities do not need to be structured or complicated. In fact some of the best ways of helping the person with dementia remain active and stimulated are to keep him or her involved in the day-to-day tasks in and around the home.

People with dementia can become tired more quickly; so ensure you're factoring time for relaxing. Often activities are best planned for the morning when the person is more likely to have energy for them. Quieter activities are often better in the afternoons and early evening, when some people with dementia feel more restless.



Encouraging independence

People with dementia should be supported to be independent for as long as possible. Being allowed to carry on with everyday activities will not only help the person hold on to these skills and encourage independence, but will allow them to feel able to contribute and know that the help is valued. This sense of purpose and wellbeing should ensure the person feels less agitated and anxious.

Why are activities so important?

Participating in activities can help to prevent frustration and boredom. Activities can:

- help the person maintain his or her independence in and around the home
- help maintain skills
- improve self esteem
- improve the quality of life for the person with dementia and their carers
- often compensate for lost abilities
- allow the person to express his or her feelings, through art, music, singing and dance
- bring pleasure to the person with dementia and their carers as they share these moments together
- provide social contact through social activities and outings, keeping both the person with dementia and their carers in touch with family and friends.

How to plan activities

Keeping to a routine is very important. Planning activities which can be part of a regular routine will help you structure the day.

Have a variety of activities organised that the person with dementia can do each day, for example memory box, looking at photos, looking through a life history book; folding clothes and napkins; dusting; knitting or other activities which are enjoyed.

Tips to help you plan activities:

- Plan activities that the person can do both with their carer and either alone or with someone else – this way you get some time to yourself.
- Think about what the person has enjoyed doing in the past and plan activities which will involve things they can remember.
- It is usually better not to do anything which involves learning new tasks and skills – stick to what they already know.
- Make sure the person will be safe, by providing an environment which will allow them to enjoy the activity without worrying about their safety.

Things to keep in mind

Prompting

You may need to help the person through each stage of a task, for example, for vacuuming; you may need to remind the person where the vacuum cleaner is kept, where to plug it in and how to switch it on.

Time

Remember that many people with dementia have problems concentrating. Therefore, having a variety of things to do and planning extra time for necessary tasks, like getting dressed, can help.

Support

Try not to be critical of how they do things. The main aim of activities is to help the person with dementia achieve what they are capable of and ensure they are stimulated and happy.

Adapt

Remember that the person with dementia will gradually lose the ability to do some tasks as the illness progresses, but will retain other skills. Each person will lose different skills depending on which part of the brain the dementia affects. Try and be aware of these changes and adapt activities to suit them. This will reduce the amount of distress and anxiety they feel as the dementia progresses.

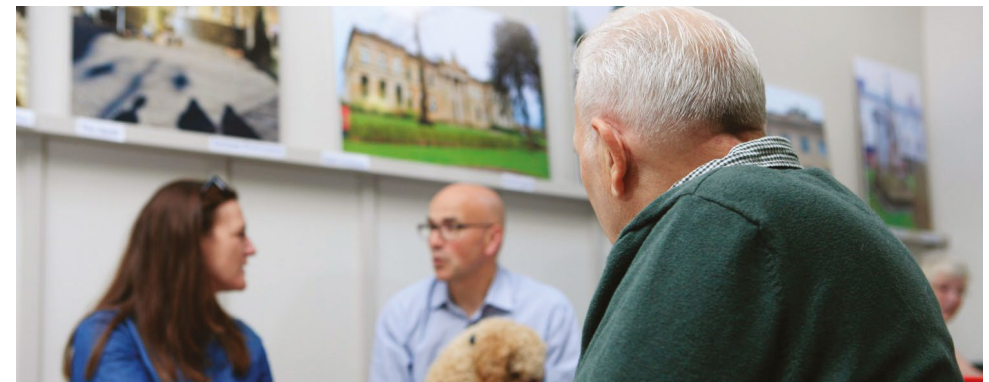
Always remember the person you care for is still who they always were, but it is just their ability to do things which changes.

Community

Help the person stay involved in community activities. For example, the person may have been used to going to their local place of worship or to local clubs. Make sure that they can continue to go if they want to, as it is important to keep in touch with friends and maintain a normal routine. This will ensure the person with dementia remains a part of the community.

Explain to people the person may come into contact with that they have dementia as long as they are happy with disclosing this information. You can outline what difficulties they may have and let them know how they can help.

For more information, see our Friendship and dementia leaflet.



Some suggestions for activities

At home

If you can involve the person you care for in everyday household activities this will help them retain useful skills.

If they want to do certain activities over and over again, as long as they are not dangerous or likely to harm anyone, let them carry on if you can. As long as the person is happy and content with what they are doing there is no harm in repetition.

Housework

Doing housework may not be to everyone's liking, but these skills are often retained until later in the illness. Try reminiscing at the same time – recalling how things were done in the old days can make tasks more meaningful and enjoyable.

Music and dance

Listening to music, singing and dancing are other activities which can be enjoyed at home right through to the later stages of dementia.

Many people with moderate to severe dementia can still sing favourite songs from their childhood and younger days. If the person used to play the piano or another instrument this may be another skill they retain.

If the person with dementia finds it hard to communicate during the later stages of dementia you will often find that they can express their emotions through music. Music can also be used to help the person calm down if feeling frustrated.

Massage or manicure

Try giving a hand massage or manicure. This is easy to do at home and can provide a great deal of pleasure and relaxation, as there is social as well as physical contact. This is often particularly appreciated later in the illness when verbal communication is limited.

Reading

Reading can become difficult for someone with dementia as their illness progresses. If the person would still like to read you can help by reading aloud or going through it with them.

Reading to the person will allow him or her to keep up with the latest news and follow interests. Family and friends can also help with this activity.

Audio books are useful as the person can relax and listen to the book.

Keep books with pictures of particular interest around the house so the person with dementia can look at during quiet moments.

Watching TV

Quiz programmes, old films and programmes around the person's special interests can be enjoyed by both the person with dementia and their carer.

Games

Dominoes, card games and jigsaws are enjoyed by many people. There are special jigsaws with larger pieces available and specially designed cards for those whose eyesight may be deteriorating. Try out games you know they have played and enjoyed in the past.

Reminiscence

Remembering our early childhood experiences is usually an enjoyable activity, and to some people with dementia it can be the only way that they can make contact with their own identity. People with dementia often forget recent events; however when you talk about the past or look at photos you will often find that these trigger detailed, distant memories.

The person will often show great delight in being able to share these memories and talk about old times. Do not 'test' the person's memory when looking at old objects and photos, as this can make the person feel frustrated or anxious if they can't remember certain people or events.

On some days the person will remember many events from looking at photos. He or she may remember who the people are in the photo or where the photo was taken, but on other days the photos will not trigger any memories. You can help by labelling photos to identify who and where the people are.

The senses

Smell, touch, taste, sight, sounds can all be part of reminiscing. You can just have an informal chat or you could prepare a set of objects, photos and music. Often scents like lavender or those from work or holidays will bring back very vivid memories and can start a long discussion.

Memory boxes

Putting together a memory box is a good way of stimulating and drawing out memories. Put favourite objects, old photos, and items from the person's work in the box to be examined. If the person is agitated, looking at the objects may calm him or her down. During quiet moments when the person is tired, or you don't want to go out somewhere, looking at the photos and objects can be a very relaxing way of being together.

Life story book

In the same way as the memory box you can also put together a life story book. You could combine photos with notes about their family, work, hobbies and prominent history from their life.

Photos, post cards, scraps of material from old clothes or bedcovers and other memorabilia can be added to the storybook. As the person's illness progresses it will become more important that the memories are all written down and recorded, this way others can help the person recall those important times.

If the person does have to go into a care home this book can be taken and shown to the staff. It will provide them with a very valuable history and background of the person's life, which will help them to get to know them.



Creative activities

Writing

You may find that the person you care for enjoys writing. Perhaps you could suggest they write about school days, past holidays and family, so that grandchildren will be able to read about their past. These stories could be made into a book with photos and old postcards. Even later on, writing postcards and birthday cards can be a way for the person to keep in touch with friends and family.

Art

Producing artwork is often exciting and interesting. Even if the person has not painted a picture since their school days, being creative with paints and other craft materials can be very enjoyable and satisfying.

Depending on the person's interests and what they enjoy doing there are many different types of projects you could enjoy together. Look around art shops for ideas including adult colouring books, sand art, painting by numbers and collage kits.

Restoring furniture

Sanding and polishing can be very relaxing and the person with dementia is often absorbed for long periods of time if they enjoy this type of work. However, be aware of electric sanders and paint strippers which can cause accidents.

Knitting, sewing and embroidery

If the person you care for has always knitted or done embroidery or tapestry you may find they retain these skills for a long time. You might have to encourage them to start and be prepared to help with each stage, but it is worth persevering.

Gardening

Gardening provides a change of scenery and will also ensure you both get some fresh air and exercise. It may be a good idea for the person to have their own patch of garden to dig and plant in. Weeding, trimming, sweeping paths and general tidying in the garden can all be tasks many people with dementia may enjoy. However, make sure they don't use electrical equipment or potentially dangerous tools.

Try to plan the garden so that there are lots of different varieties of plants, with bright colours and interesting scents – for example, lavender and rosemary. These can be stimulating and enjoyable for people with dementia even late on in the illness.

If you do not have access to a garden, indoor gardening, such as planting bulbs and herbs in pots can be an enjoyable activity too.



Going out and about

Exercise and sports

Getting outside for some exercise will help both of you. Try to incorporate a daily walk in your routine – it doesn't have to be far. If the person you care for has always enjoyed longer walks, keep this up and try to vary the route and location.

For those who enjoy swimming ask at the swimming pool when the quieter times are, as lots of noise and activity can make the person anxious. Many pools can also provide assistance to help the person in and out of the pool if they need it.

Going out for a coffee or a meal

If you both like going out try to make this part of your routine. Aim to find a quiet café or restaurant where you can both relax.

Museums

Going to a museum and looking at objects which the person can relate to and which are part of his or her past can be very enjoyable. Watch out for exhibitions which may be of special interest.

Theatre and cinema

If you both like going to the theatre or cinema it is a good idea to keep going for as long as possible. Check with your local cinema when it is quieter, for example mid-morning, as this may be preferable for someone with dementia.

Going for a drive

Taking the person you care for out for a drive will often calm him or her down. Driving round areas from their childhood, or where the person worked, will often stimulate memories and you can talk about past times.

Public transport

If you don't have access to a car perhaps you could organise family or friends to help out occasionally or look into other options which would allow you to get out and about.

The Scottish Government provides free or subsidised bus and train travel to older (60+) and disabled people across Scotland. Some local authorities include people with dementia as disabled but some don't – check with your local council.

The scheme allows for free bus travel throughout Scotland and across the border to Berwick-upon-Tweed and Carlisle. It also gives those based in Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles four free return journeys to the mainland per year.

People with dementia may also qualify for either a senior (60+) or disabled person's railcard which gives them 1/3 off of train travel.

Taxi card schemes

Ask your local council if it has a taxi transport scheme. Many councils provide cheaper taxi travel or a certain number of free or cheap taxi journeys a month to disabled people, including those with dementia.



Who can help

Family and friends

Ask family and friends to come round and visit. Make sure they know what to expect and encourage them to do some kind of activity while they're visiting.

Dementia Helpline

The Dementia Helpline, 0808 808 3000, is a free, confidential 24 hour service offering information and a listening ear. You don't even have to give your name if you prefer not to. Call at any time to talk things over or to find out about any aspect of dementia, how to cope with caring and finding help locally.

Courses for carers

Carer courses cover a variety of topics and respond to what carers say they want to know. The courses offer advice and information on practical skills, as well as encouraging alternative ways of thinking not only about what dementia means, but also about what it means to you to be a carer. Going on a course is a good way of getting in touch with other carers who know what it is like from first-hand experience and also to share your experiences and expertise if you wish.

Contact the Dementia Helpline or your local Alzheimer Scotland service for more information.

Notes
