

Activity Engagement

*Increasing pleasant activities to improve mood and
reduce troubling behaviors*

Why is Engagement So Important?

Meaningful activity engagement for someone with memory loss has a number of benefits:

- It decreases agitation and challenging behaviors such as wandering and aggression
- It decreases anxiety and depression
- It improves sleep
- It helps maintain brain health
- After an initial investment, it frees up caregiver “on duty” time
- It increases feelings of bondedness between caregiver and care recipient and can help balance out less pleasant interactions

Most importantly, **the innate human need to participate in a meaningful occupation or pastime does not disappear in the context of dementia.** However, it may be more difficult for your relatives to fill this need themselves.

Choosing Activity Engagement: How to Start

Knowing where to start can be the most daunting part of setting up an engaged day. Spend a moment to think about the following questions:

- If my relative worked, what was their job?

- Did my relative have any hobbies? What did they do for fun?

- What did my relative and I do for fun together?

- What was my relative's role in our family, or what were their household duties?

If you can't think of answers to the questions above, don't worry. You can still introduce new activities to your relative, even if they've never expressed an interest in them before. Remember: dementia can change personality, including likes and dislikes, so **never say never**. For example, many people with memory loss who had no prior interest in arts and crafts love to use adult coloring books.

Tips for Adapting Activities

Some of the items you've listed above will not be practical on a day-to-day basis. However, we can use them as a jumping-off point using the following methods:

- Scale down the activity. For example, if you and your relative used to go on long walks together, can you cut the walking time in half, or walk in a different environment? If you and your relative loved to travel, can you come up with a short day trip itinerary?
- Break the activity into smaller, more manageable chunks. For example, if your relative used to throw elaborate dinner parties, try giving them small, discrete tasks one at a time (ie: "please chop this carrot," or "let's go through this cookbook together and choose a menu").
- Focus on roles and feelings. If your relative worked as a nurse but had to retire, think about what they might have gotten out of their work. They probably enjoy helping and nurturing people during a difficult time, so you might try giving them a "case" and asking for advice.

General Useful Tips

- **Focus on process rather than results.** If your relative spends an hour sorting items and they're more jumbled than they were to begin with, that's ok! It's most important that they are engaged.
- Choose activities that can be done in short bursts. People with memory loss often have shorter attention spans and difficulty concentrating.
- Have a few activities available so if your relative tires of one you can move on to another quickly.
- Have materials set up in advance and keep the surrounding environment as distraction-free as possible.
- Change your approach:
 - a) Instead of asking "Would you like to color?" Try, "Now it's time to color" or "I would love for you to join me."
 - b) Instead of asking at all, sit down next to your relative and quietly start doing the activity yourself.
- Make activities social – involve friends and family.
- If your relative refuses an activity, don't force them to participate. You can always try again in a few days, weeks, or months.

Activity Suggestions

- Listen to or play music, or go see a concert
- Dance
- Look through photo albums or family videos
- Take down an oral history or simply share old family stories
- Cook a simple meal together or bake boxed cookies
- Do a jigsaw puzzle or word search
- Listen to a book or short stories on tape
- Read poetry out loud
- Paint, draw, or collage
- Go for a walk in nature
- Do a relaxed exercise video, like chair yoga
- Plant and tend to house or yard plants
- Watch a youtube train ride video
- Spend time with friends, children, and grandchildren
- Volunteer together
- Go to a Memory Café
- Spend time with pets or other animals
- Go to a museum during off-hours
- Sorting: collections, coins, silverware, etc.
- Fold laundry
- Wash dishes
- Dust and vacuum
- Go “shopping” for items in a magazine
- Use a rummage box or twiddle muff

My Ideas for Activity Engagement

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3. _____

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