



*ACTIVITIES*  
*&*  
*COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT*

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Empowering older adults, caregivers, and their advocates through information, education, & support.

A division of the Altenheim Retirement Community



## **Altenheim Resource Services**

Altenheim Resource Services has been a division of the Altenheim Retirement Community since 1995. We offer free, unbiased information on aging and resources. We receive no local, state, or federal funding.

Our goal is to empower older adults, caregivers, and their advocates through information, education, advocacy, & support.

Learning about the issues we face as we age, the needs of our care receivers, and the available resources and services help us make intelligent choices about our lives. We hope to give older adults, caregivers, and advocates some tools to help them guide their lives and their care.

We offer professional assistance for those seeking information, resources, and options for care. We'll discuss your situation and your needs at no charge. Contacts are confidential.



## **Altenheim Retirement Community**

Altenheim Retirement Community offers housing for independent adults who are 65 years of age and older. A part of the Wheeling community since 1891, Altenheim Home for Aged and Friendless Women was founded by Wheeling brewer and businessman, Anton Reymann, and offered life-care and housing for older women. The focus changed to housing for older adults in 2004, when three free-standing cottages were constructed. An additional five cottages were erected with construction being completed in 2014.

Cover photo: With thanks to Pat R. for sharing the picture of the railroad jigsaw puzzle.

## Why the focus on ACTIVITIES?

Activities are part of everyone's day. Personal care, daily chores, going to work, attending church, singing along to Paul Simon – all are activities. Doing nothing can be an activity.

Activities for those who have dementia can be challenging. We must adjust our expectations. We have to change our thinking from “getting it right and getting it done as soon as we can” to “getting it done in a way that is beneficial to the care receiver – taking as long as the care receiver needs”.

Activities help us to feel productive. We have accomplished something when we complete an activity.

Activities can include any number of people. The person with dementia may enjoy folding towels. They may enjoy doing a jigsaw puzzle with another person. They may enjoy listening to music and singing with a group.

Read on to learn more about activities for those with dementia. Resources can be found at the end of the document.

# ACTIVITIES

Why are activities important?

*ACTIVITIES* are the things that all people do and include all areas of all people's lives.

*ACTIVITIES* help the person with cognitive impairment organize their day.

*ACTIVITIES* help structure time.

*ACTIVITIES* can be active or passive, done alone, or with others.

*ACTIVITIES* utilize the strengths and abilities of the person with dementia.

*ACTIVITIES* can help decrease unwanted behaviors.

*ACTIVITIES* provide a sense of security, stability, fun, and socialization.

*ACTIVITIES* can help you to reassure, distract, and redirect your loved one.

ACTIVITIES represent all areas of people's lives.

### DAILY ROUTINES

Personal care

Bathing, dressing, shaving, combing hair, preparing for bed or for the day

Mealtime

Preparing food, setting the table, cooking, eating

Chores

Sweeping, dusting, laundry, vacuuming, folding clothes, making the bed, shopping

### OTHER AREAS

Taking a walk, exercising, dancing

Having coffee or tea, talking, playing a simple game

Reading a book, doing a puzzle

Praying, singing a hymn

Going out to lunch, going to the park, visiting friends

Attending a concert

Writing a card to a friend or family member

Spending time with a companion animal - petting, brushing

REMEMBER - anything can be an activity!

When planning activities, think about:

## THE PERSON

\*What skills does the person still have?

Focus on strengths. The person may not be able to do all of an activity but they can still participate and perform parts of an activity.

\*What are the person's life loves?

This gives you an idea of activities the person may enjoy or ideas of how you can direct a conversation.

\*What does the person enjoy?

The person may not be able to do the activity the way they once did but focus on the enjoyment of the process. It's not about getting the job done, it's about what happens while you're doing it.

\*What are the person's likes? Dislikes?

Focus on what the person likes. Avoiding the dislikes can help avoid problems.

\*How much direction does the person need?

Can they begin with minimal direction? Do they need constant supervision?

\*Does the person have physical challenges?

Visual impairment? Hearing impairment? Movement issues due to arthritis? An activity may be a problem due to these issues with dementia having a lesser impact.

\*Who is this person?

When we've seen one person with dementia, we've seen one person with dementia. The person is still very much an individual. Know your care receiver. Be aware of their abilities.

When planning activities, think about:

## THE ACTIVITY

\*What is activity?

An activity is anything you do. Keep in mind that “being is doing”.

\*What activities can be part of the daily routine?

An activity can include activities of daily living, anything you do during the day, and/or interactions with family and friends. Consider, also, what activities the person may have done if they didn't have dementia.

\*Enjoyment not achievement is the purpose.

Make activities failure-free.

\*Avoid stress-inducing activities and attitudes.

A sense of success and accomplishment is important. There is no rush to complete an activity. The goal is enjoyment.

\*Relate activities to previous work.

A homemaker or a retired chef may enjoy preparing food. Someone who worked in a business or bank may enjoy wrapping coins, putting stamps on envelopes, or grouping items. Someone who farmed, may enjoy working with plants.

\*What did the person enjoy doing before they had dementia?

Consider what hobbies they had. Did they collect items? Did they travel? Did they enjoy sports? Fishing?

\*Modify activities as needed.

The activity may need to be modified due to progressing impairment, complexity of the task, fatigue, or illness.

\*Consider the time of day.

When is the person at their best? At their worst?

\*Adjust activities to the stage of dementia.

As dementia progresses, you may want to use sensory stimulation, music, or directed physical activities. Shorten the activity to accommodate the shortened attention span. Keep in mind that inertia (or the ability to start an activity or a conversation) are impacted by the disease.

When planning activities, think about:

## THE ENVIRONMENT

\*Make activities safe

Do the activity in a safe place. Watch sharp objects such as scissors or knives. Remember, the person may have a tendency to put things in their mouth.

\*Be aware of the surroundings for activities

Is the area too open or too large? Is there too much stimulation? Is the temperature comfortable?

\*Minimize distractions that might be confusing or frightening.

The TV, radio, other people, or conversation may be overstimulating and distracting. Mirrors can be distracting. The person with dementia may fail to recognize their own reflection (called "mirrored-self-misidentification") which can lead to confusion or the belief there is a stranger in the room.

\*Maximize lighting, minimize shadows

Increased light helps with vision. Lighting may also help with sundowning. Minimizing shadows helps to eliminate distractions, misinterpretation of shapes, and fearful situations.

\*Create a pleasant environment

Soft music may provide a calm atmosphere. Too much noise can be overstimulating. TV and radio can be distracting or even create fearful situations. Tell the person what is being done. Explain in short sentences, going step-by-step.

When planning activities, think about:

## THE APPROACH

\*Offer support and supervision

You may need to show the person how to perform an activity with simple, step-by-step directions. Don't do it for them.

\*Concentrate on the process, not the end result

Does it really matter that the towels aren't folded right? Focus on spending time together, providing a sense of accomplishment for the individual, creating moments of joy.

\*Be flexible

If the person doesn't want to do something - OK. If he/she wants to do it differently - OK. (Keep safety in mind.) Avoid rigid rules and regulations, and adjust the activity to accommodate moods, abilities, and differing situations.

\*Be relaxed. Be realistic.

Don't worry about doing activities all day...or for an hour...or any for "set" time. It's the process. Create the MOMENT of joy.

\*Help the activity started.

Those who are cognitively impaired may be unable to organize, plan, or initiate action.

\*Break activities into simple steps.

Too many directions at once are overwhelming. Focus on one task at a time, and avoid complicated instructions. Avoid putting too many steps into one sentence. Avoid the use of "and" in your directions. IE: First you do this and then you do that and then you do...

\*Assist with difficult parts of the activity.

Ask for help for a smaller component of the task. For example, if cooking the person may have difficulty measuring so ask for assistance with stirring and you can do the measuring.

\*Let the person know they're needed.

Ask if they can help. Don't place too many demands on them. Ask for assistance with a task that isn't too complicated.

## THE APPROACH (continued)

\*Stress a sense of purpose.

Tell the person you'd like help with a specific task, not just a general "help me".

\*Don't criticize or correct. Let the person "do".

\*Encourage self-expression.

Music, art, or conversation.

\*Involve the person in conversation.

Even if they are unable to respond, include them in the conversation. Speak slowly. Don't use slang words. Allow time for them to process the spoken word. Be patient.

\*Substitute an activity for a behavior.

Reassure, distract, and redirect. Redirect means to turn the attention to some activity in which they can participate.

\*If it doesn't work now, it may work later.

Try again. Conversely, if it worked now, it may not work later.

When planning activities, think about:

## THE PLAN

When making activities plan for the cognitively impaired, you will need activities that provide a sense of meaning and purpose as well as a sense of pleasure. What does the person want to do? What might create the moment of joy?

Think about the five senses when planning activities: sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste

Try keeping an Activity Journal: List activities the person has enjoyed and try the activities to see how the person reacts. Assess the following:

\*How well did the person respond?

\*What activities worked best? Which didn't work? What seemed to be the problem?

\*Was there too much confusion? Was there too much to do? Was there too little to do?

\*Were spontaneous activities enjoyable and easily completed?

\*Did they enjoy the time spent in the activity? Were there opportunities to create moments of joy?

\*Did the person show a sense of pride and accomplishment?

\*What is the individual's schedule? How do activities fit into the routine?

\*What about the person's attention span? Were the activities or tasks too long for the attention span? Were they too much for the person's abilities?

\*Did any activity / task precipitate a catastrophic reaction?

\*Did any activity cause the person to become impatient? Bored? Angry? Agitated?

\*Did any activity/ task cause a fun, positive response?

When planning activities, think about:

## MAKING THE MOST OF ACTIVITIES

There are things to consider that can make an activity more enjoyable and help you avoid a negative consequence.

Keep these things in mind:

\*What are your person's strengths and weaknesses? What skills have been retained? What is their level of functioning? Gauge activities based on how the person is doing now, not how they have done in the past.

\*Time of day matters. What is the person's "best" time? When do you want to schedule appointments? When is the best time for certain activities? You don't want to initiate a strenuous activity before bed time. You may want to avoid scary or violent shows at night. The news can be disturbing to some (for example veterans who are exposed to combat activity news coverage).

\*Consider the person when trying to initiate an activity or if the person is not receptive. Are they in pain? Arthritis can make movement uncomfortable or painful. Are they too cold or too hot? Are they uncomfortable in the environment? Is the activity something in which the person has no interest? Is there somewhere they feel that they need to be? (Think about past jobs or tasks where time was a consideration such as the start of a shift, the need to meet the kids at the bus stop, etc.)

\*Allow your person to do as much as they are able to do. It may be a challenge for you not to intervene, to want to help, to want it to be done a certain way. It's not about you. It's about your care receiver having an outlet for self-expression, creativity, success, and a feeling of being productive. Also, consider that unused skills are lost more quickly.

\*Technology can be helpful on many levels. The person with cognitive impairment may have tech skills or they may not have the ability to use technology. How tech savvy were they before? How involved were they with technology through their life? (New knowledge or long-term memory?)

When planning activities, think about:

## COMMUNICATION

Communication is critical to the person with cognitive impairment. Your verbal and non-verbal communication can make or break a situation.

Non-verbal communication is a big part of communication. Facial expression, gestures, and body language convey a message. The message that is received may have nothing to do with the person but their perception is one of apprehension.

Verbal communication is what we say. What we say, how we say it, and tone of voice impacts the person.

Keep these things in mind:

\*Don't ask 'test' questions such as "Do you remember....?" They most likely don't remember. They have a cognitive impairment.

\*Be aware of the language you use. The person may not understand current slang or terms.

\*Be positive. Be calm. Be pleasant.

\*Get the person's attention by saying their name, and, if appropriate, use a gentle touch on the arm.

\*Approach them from the front.

\*Remember your non-verbal communication. Saying "hello" and then frowning means the frown (non-verbal communication) is going to mean more than the greeting (verbal communication).

\*Speak in short sentences.

\*Allow time for the person to process the information. It can take several seconds to a few minutes for someone to respond to questions or instructions.

When planning activities, think about:

## A DAILY SCHEDULE

### MORNING ACTIVITIES

- \*Wash / shower, brush teeth / dentures, get dressed, make the bed
- \*Prepare breakfast, set the table, eat, clean up the table, do dishes
- \*Have coffee / tea, chat, and reminisce
- \*Exercise: indoor or outdoor

### AFTERNOON ACTIVITIES

- \*Prepare lunch, set the table, eat
- \*Garden (raised beds can help with accessibility)
- \*Visit (go visit friends or schedule visits at home)
- \*Take a short nap (be aware of the impact of the nap on sleeping at night)
- \*Take a walk (Outside or indoor. Would Mall walking be an option? There are the benefits of exercise, things to look at for conversation, and benches)
- \*Play a game
- \*Do some chores: dust, vacuum

### EVENING ACTIVITIES

- \*Prepare dinner, set table, eat, clean up the table, do dishes
- \*Play cards (Go Fish or other game), watch TV, give a massage
- \*Take a bath, get ready for bed
- \*Read a book together, look at a magazine, coffee table book, or photo album
- \*You may want to consider "quieter" activities in the evening to prepare for sleep.

### MORE ACTIVITIES

- \*Organize a scrapbook of activities with pictures, shapes, or words cut from magazines
- \*Create a collage with pictures, words, and shapes with Elmer's glue. You can use foam core board, a small canvas, or card stock. You can also create a shadow box filled with items that are important to the person. (Wedding picture, military medal or ribbon, dried flowers, etc.)
- \*Create a greeting card. You can use pictures cut from magazines, embellishments, or silk flowers.
- \*Organize the family photo album labeling the pictures with names and locations.
- \*Listen to music, watch TV (be aware of what is on!), do puzzles

When planning activities, think about:

## HOW TO MAKE ROUTINE ACTIONS FUN

*The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care* makes these suggestions:

\*Make getting dressed a fashion show

\*Have a sing-along when doing any routine activity. What was the music of their "era"?

\*Cooking can stimulate the sense of smell and can provide an opportunity for conversation and reminiscence (remembering family meals, recipes, or the family's cooks).

\*Aromatherapy using essential oils can also stimulate memories.

Note: The sense of smell is strongly linked to memory as the brain areas that process smell are closely connected to the areas responsible for our memories.

(<https://health.clevelandclinic.org/smells-and-memory>)

\*Play a favorite song for distraction if the person is becoming agitated or angry.

\*Dance to that favorite song.

\*Look at old magazines such as Look, Life, or Post or read current magazines together. Old ads and events of the day can be prompts for reminiscing. Check on Facebook for free items.

\*Check with your local library to see if they discard their current magazines or go to your library's book sale. You can also check on eBay.

\*Read stories, poems, or Scripture aloud.

\*Attend church services or watch them on Zoom.

\*Play word games such as naming opposites.

\*Pray together

\*Use clay or Play Doh® to create fun shapes. You can use cookie cutters or other shapes to cut the dough.

\*Have a scavenger hunt for items to make a mobile.

\*Make a gift for someone.

\*Socialization is important. What are opportunities for increasing socialization?

When planning activities, think about:

### FORMER WORK EXPERIENCE AND FORMER “LIFE LONG ACTIVITY / HOBBY LOVES”

If the person worked with furniture, they may enjoy sanding or staining furniture.

If the person worked in a business or accounting, they may enjoy sorting coins.

If they worked in construction, they may enjoy sorting screws, nuts, bolts, or organizing a tool box.

If the person was a musician, they may enjoy playing their instrument, singing, or listening to music. Develop a play list of favorite songs.

If a person was a physician or in health care, they may enjoy having the tools of their profession such a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, or other items they used.

If the person was a golfer, they may enjoy miniature golf or Par 3, or they may enjoy cleaning the golf clubs and golf balls. They may enjoy watching golf on TV.

If the person was a teacher, they may enjoy flash cards, looking at old yearbooks, or you might consider an online page or social media page for classmates from their schools.

If the person worked in cosmetology, they may enjoy hair care items, having a mani and pedi, or other related items.

Depending on your care receiver’s cognitive status, you may ask them what they would like to do and offer a few choices.

For those care receivers who are more impaired, you may ask them how old they are. Their answer can offer some insight into what their interests may have been, where they lived, and other information that is “time-stamped”.

## When planning activities, remember:

\*Every person with dementia is an individual. What works one time, may not work another time. What works for one person, may not work for another. The success of an activity may vary from day to day.

\*Avoid stereotyping individuals. Not all people like children. Not all people like animals. Consider this if you plan to involve grandchildren, nieces / nephews, pets.

\*Don't expect every activity to be successful.

\*Remember basic communication techniques when doing activities:

Face the person

Initiate conversation by saying their name to get their attention

Guide with touch or non-verbal cues

\*Activities should be something the person enjoys and not something they perceive as childish. Make activities age appropriate.

Activities should:

\*Have a purpose

\*Require voluntary participation

\*Be non-competitive

\*Be planned for short periods of time to allow for a decreased attention span

\*Require a few simple items

\*Not be complicated

\*Be geared to the person's present abilities. It may be necessary to modify an activity or have the person participate in certain segments of the activity.

\*Be geared to the time of day

\*Be geared to the person's interests and condition

\*Allow for quiet time. The person does not need to be busy all the time.

\*Remember – overstimulation can cause fatigue, frustration, and anxiety.

The purpose of an activity is to enhance a person's self-esteem, benefit their emotional well-being, and provide a sense of accomplishment.

Structure and organization of the person's day are added benefits of activities!

[Sources: *Activities at Home: Planning the Day for a Person Living with Middle or Late Stage Alzheimer's Disease*, Alzheimer's Association, TS0053, September 2022; *Alzheimer's Disease: Diagnosis and Management*, CME Resource; and, *Interaction by Design*, Sylvia Nissenboim & Christine Vroman.]

When planning activities, think about:

## RESOURCES

### Activities of General Interest

#### Art

- \*Paint by Number
- \*Diamond Art

#### Cards & Games

- \*Euchre, poker, Go Fish
- \*Pool, Corn hole

#### Crafts

- \*Beading, needlework
- \*Erector sets, Legos
- \*Greeting cards, making a collage
- \*Flower arranging, making a wreath

#### Exercise & Dance

- \*Taking a walk
- \*Chair exercises
- \*Dance free-style or other forms of dance (depending on your loved one)

#### Home & Garden

- \*Cooking
- \*Gardening, starting plants for spring
- \*Gathering and sorting pictures, framing them or putting them in a photo album
- \*Pet care
- \*Folding towels or other laundry

#### Literature

- \*Books on tape, picture books, magazines

#### TV & Movies

- \*Old TV shows or movies from their era (Movies may be too long or too complicated)

#### Puzzles

- \*Large piece jigsaw puzzles
- \*You can get personalized puzzles with pictures of family, pets, or other)

## Internet Resources

The Activities Handbook, The Alzheimer's Society, United Kingdom

[https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/AS\\_77AC\\_The-Activities-Handbook.pdf](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/AS_77AC_The-Activities-Handbook.pdf)

Activities for People Living with Dementia, The Alzheimer's Society of British Columbia, Canada

[www.alzheimerbc.org](http://www.alzheimerbc.org)

[https://alzheimer.ca/bc/sites/bc/files/documents/und-beh\\_activity-handout\\_april2018.pdf](https://alzheimer.ca/bc/sites/bc/files/documents/und-beh_activity-handout_april2018.pdf)

National Institute on Aging, [Adapting Activities for People with Alzheimer's Disease](#), or

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers-caregiving/adapting-activities-people-alzheimers-disease>

Alzheimer's Foundation of America, [Therapeutic Activities for the 3 Main Stages of Alzheimer's disease](#)

or

<https://alzfdn.org/therapeutic-activities-for-3-main-stages-of-alzheimers-disease/>

## Online Experiences

### MUSEUMS

Met Museum

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>

12 Famous Museums Virtual Tours

<https://www.travelandleisure.com/attractions/museumsgalleries/museums-with-virtual-tours>

Minneapolis Institute of Art Museum

<https://collections.artsmia.org/>

Enjoy the Louvre at home

<https://www.louvre.fr/en/online-tours>

Museum of the American Revolution

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtual-museum-tour>

## Virtual Experiences

Virtual Visits: 16 Famous Museums You Can Explore at Home

<https://www.travelandleisure.com/attractions/museums-galleries/museums-with-virtual-tours>

New England Aquarium <https://www.neaq.org/visit/at-home-events-and-activities>

The Hidden Worlds of the National Parks <https://artsandculture.withgoogle.com/en-us/nationalparks-service>

Watch free nature livestreams and documentaries

<https://explore.org>

Decorah eagles

<https://www.raptorresource.org/birdcams/decorah-eagles/>

San Diego Zoo- live animal cams

<https://zoo.sandiegozoo.org/live-cams>

PBS

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/blog/what-to-stream-on-pbs-nature> includes the latest on Yosemite, history of the horse, the American Spring Series, Africa's Okavango Delta, volcanoes.

PBS Nature Videos

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/blog/parents-and-teachers/>

Nature Photos

<https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/photo-contest/2019-winners/>

## Books

*Creating Moments of Joy Along the Alzheimer's Journey*, Jolene Brackey, November 2016, Purdue University Press.

*A Dignified Life: Revised and Expanded The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Activities*, Virginia Bell, David Troxel, September 2016, Health Professionals Press.

Look for books at Amazon, Books a Million, eBay, or check your local library. E-book and audiobooks are often available.

Search your local browser for more ideas. Keywords might include: Alzheimer's care, dementia care, Alzheimer's activities, activities with cognitive impairment.