Staying Engaged in Meaningful Activity

Being engaged in meaningful activity allows us to meet some of our most basic needs, such as socialization, a sense of accomplishment, a sense of purpose, play, as well as our need for cognitive and physical stimulation. Such activities also give us a sense of collaboration when we participate with others.

This is true for all of us, and it doesn’t change when someone experiences dementia.

With this article, we are including a list of activity ideas and a link to a book, A Dignified Life by Virginia Bell MSW and David Troxel, MPH. This book has a wonderful chapter called Being Together – Managing and Valuing Activities. We are including their list of “Activity Pointers.”

For our purposes, an activity can be almost anything. Sitting quietly with someone is an activity. Personal care is an activity. The goal of an activity is in the doing, not in the activity itself. Make this your mantra! For instance, washing dishes and folding towels are activities that can meet most of the needs listed in the top paragraph, if done with that as the goal. The goal is not about sparkling clean dishes and perfectly folded towels; that could lead to frustration for everyone. But think of the possibilities with dishes and towels! Colors, memories, counting, stacking, the physical motion of these activities, tactile and aroma stimulation; plus, at the end, a thank you and sense of accomplishment and collaboration. There are so many possibilities when we infuse every-day activities with meaning.

As you can see, much of what we are already doing can be meaningful activity for both the caregiver and the person with the disease, with the right approach. While it may seem at first that this approach takes more time and energy – two commodities that are often very hard to come by – you will hopefully find that with practice you will actually feel you have more time and energy because both you and your loved one will feel better about how you have spent your time.

Here is Virginia Bell and David Troxel’s list of Activity Pointers:

1. The art of activities is not in what is done, it is in the doing.

2. Activities should be individualized and tap into past interests and skills.

3. Activities should be adult in nature.
4. Activities should recall a person’s work-related past.

5. Activities should stimulate all five senses.

6. Doing nothing is actually doing something.

7. Activities should tap into a person’s remaining physical skills.

8. Activities must be initiated by others.

9. Activities should be voluntary.

10. Intergenerational activities are especially desirable.

11. Activities you think will never work sometimes do.

12. Personal care is an activity.

13. Activities can be short.

14. Activities are everywhere.

15. Activities should fulfill religious and spiritual needs.

The authors elaborate on all of these points in their book, and offer additional thoughts regarding activities.

While this article focuses on meaningful activity for the person with dementia, it is important to note that care giving is a very meaningful activity. It is our hope that in the midst of grief and change, frustration and fatigue, you are also experiencing the benefits of meaningful activity as outlined in the first paragraph. Your care giving role offers opportunities to overcome obstacles, learn new things, meet new people, and engage with your loved one in new ways. For more thoughts about finding meaning in life, even in suffering, I highly recommend Viktor Frankl’s book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. And as always, we are here to help. For more ideas, please give us a call at 1-800-272-3900 or send an e-mail to laurel.kerr@alz.org.