

# ACTIVITIES



## Ideas For Sharing Your Time Together!

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# Activities

Daily activities for Alzheimer patients tend to change as the disease progresses. Alzheimer's disease tends to limit concentration and cause difficulty in following directions. These factors can turn simple activities into daily challenges.

Individuals with Alzheimer's disease often don't start or plan activities on their own. When they do, they may have trouble organizing and carrying out the activity. Many caregivers state that the individual often sits in one area of the room, paces the floor, or searches for familiar objects with little interest in doing the things that had once brought meaning and pleasure to life. By using a variety of activities matched to the person's abilities, the caregiver can help the family member enjoy his current skills and talents. A daily routine of exercise and activities can help the person with Alzheimer's retain his sense of positive self-esteem. To decide which activities are appropriate, start with some of the following ideas:

## ACTION STEPS

### **Take Stock**

Examine the person's past activities and hobbies and then figure out how to adapt or simplify these activities to match the patient's abilities.

### **Build In Structure**

Don't be afraid to give activities structure and routine. It's fine if the person does the same thing at the same time everyday. If he has a sense of routine, there's a greater chance that he'll look forward to an activity with a positive attitude. Also, when the day is broken down into shorter segments, the burden of planning seems less overwhelming. The person may not remember how many times he's been involved in a certain activity or even if he did the same activity that day.

### **Offer Support**

Focus on offering guidance and supervision and doing things with the person with Alzheimer's disease. In most cases, you'll need to show the individual how to perform the activity by providing simple, step-by-step

directions. Doing such simple tasks as sweeping or dusting can help the person with Alzheimer's disease experience a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

### **Look For Favorites**

Keep in mind that the person who once enjoyed drinking coffee and reading the newspaper in the morning may still find that activity enjoyable. Don't be concerned that she might not be able to make sense of what she's reading. The real point is that it is familiar and that she enjoys what she's doing. Reminisce together, but don't be too picky about facts. Let respect, not the record books, rule.

**Talk:** You can tell the same story over and over. You don't need a very big repertoire to be appreciated as a sparkling conversationalist.

- Say "tell me more" when they start talking about a memory
- Reminisce about a favorite summer
- Remember great inventions
- Identify states and capitols
- Name the presidents
- Finish famous sayings
- Remember famous people
- Finish nursery rhymes
- Ask simple trivia questions
- Finish Bible quotes
- Reminisce about the first kiss
- Recall friendships

### ***Question suggestions:***

- Do you recall any special friends from childhood? What happy times did you have together? Have you kept in touch with any of them?
- Tell an amusing story about a friend.
- Who was the best friend you ever had?
- Have you ever had a pen pal?
- Did you ever meet your pen pal?
- Did you ever lose a friend?
- Who is your best friend? How did you meet?

## **Fads Of The Roaring Twenties**

Ask people to name all the fads they remember from this era. Perhaps they have stories to tell from participating in some of them:

- Mah-jongg
- Dance marathons: the Charleston
- The pajama-wearing craze
- Rocking chair derbies

## **Keepsakes**

This topic gives everyone an opportunity to talk about something precious to them. Ask people if they have a keepsake or picture from their wedding, honeymoon, or early marriage that they would like to share. It might help if you bring along a special keepsake of your own.

### *Question Suggestions*

- What is your favorite keepsake? Would you care to show it to us? Where and how did you get it? Why does it have special meaning for you?
- As a child what was your favorite keepsake?
- Have you ever given a gift that became a precious keepsake to someone?

## **Be Flexible**

Adjust to the person's level of ability and look for hidden messages. When a person insists that she doesn't want to do something, it might be her way of telling you that she can't do it or fears doing it. If an individual patient has problems with one part of a task such as separating dishes and putting them into a cabinet, you might want to take over part of the task and ask the person to hand you dishes one-by-one.

Take a cue from new moms and learn to be flexible about what gets done when. Get over your reluctance to pamper yourself before all your work is done. Learn to make "have fun" your top priority!

## **Stress the Importance of their Involvement**

Emphasize activities that help the individual feel like a valued part of the household and experience a feeling of success and accomplishment. Examples include gardening, raking leaves or simple household chores. Working along with you on such tasks as setting the table, wiping countertops, folding napkins, or emptying wastebaskets will help the person feel useful and sociable.

### **Don't Forget Family And Friends**

Plan for social activities such as family picnics or birthday parties, but make special allowances for the person with the disease. Allow for frequent rest periods and try to prevent family members from overwhelming the individual.

**Invite Friends Over:** Establish a regular time for coffee and conversation. Even when they can no longer participate meaningfully, Alzheimer's patients enjoy the chatter, the laughter, and they join in as best they can. This is a great idea for family members of nursing home residents also. Often social services staff will cooperate by making a lounge or room available, providing refreshments and spreading the work of your coffee hours to other families. It doesn't hurt to ask!

### **Focus On Enjoyment, Not Achievement**

Help the individual find activities that build on remaining skills and talents. A person who had once been a professional artist might become frustrated over the declining quality of her work, but someone who had never pursued art as a career might enjoy a new opportunity for self-expression.

### **Be Realistic And Relaxed**

Don't be concerned about filling up every minute of the day with activity. Because of a shortened attention span, the person with Alzheimer's disease needs a balance of activity and rest and may need more frequent breaks and changes in activities.

### **Relate Activity To Work Life**

A person who once worked in a business office might enjoy putting coins in holders, doing routine mailings, or making lists on a legal pad or in a notebook. At the same time, someone who had been a farmer or gardener would probably enjoy working in the yard. Activities that relate to a former career are often the most familiar, reassuring and enjoyable for the patient.

### **Emphasize Strengths**

Everyone with Alzheimer's disease has some talents and strengths which can be tapped into in order to give additional meaning to their lives. These

are the strengths that can be revived through the senses. The fading of concrete, rational thinking does not mean that other areas of a person's life cannot still bring joy and a sense of accomplishment. Recovering the past and what was enjoyed (singing, painting, caring for pets, gardening, etc.) can provide gateways to hours of reminiscence, unlocking the long-term memories.

The person with dementia will probably not have the same skill level in painting, playing a musical instrument, etc., but if they are enjoying the process of mixing colors or getting an old familiar tune out, the process is working. The most important idea to keep in mind is not to correct the person if they are making a mistake or not doing something they once could. He or she will become embarrassed and humiliated and probably will not attempt this project again.



The touch of soil for someone who enjoyed gardening, the feel of piano keys for someone who played for the church choir, even the feel of rocking a life-sized baby doll for someone who found great joy in motherhood can be an anxiety reducer and memory enhancer.

A last, but very important point to remember is that the person with Alzheimer's must be enjoying the process if it is to enhance their life. In the very early stages of the disease, a person who used to play the violin might not want to touch the instrument because the knowledge that their playing is not as it once was would be very painful. Likewise, a person who enjoyed carpentry and making things from wood would not want to continue because the awareness of what once was and can never be again would only emphasize deficits. However, as the disease progresses, that same carpenter might again enjoy sanding and working in simple ways with wood, as then the long-term memories give pleasure.

Every person with Alzheimer's is different, so the caregiver must look for clues. There does come a point in a woman's life when she enjoys the feel and texture of wool thread as it reminds her of the sweaters she used to make and the loved ones who wore those sweaters many years ago. In the early stages, she will feel badly she can no longer knit. As the disease moves on, those feelings lessen and the memories bring joy.

The person with Alzheimer's is no longer creating memories and so needs the past to bring meaning to their lives. Think of yourself at a class reunion... memories can be fun!

## **Have Fun Together**

Picture this: you wake up tomorrow morning to a typically dreary January day. The holidays are over. A mountain of chores awaits you. Who has time for pleasure? Besides, your spouse with Alzheimer's disease is relying on you to fill his or her day, too.

Unable to initiate or carry out activities on their own, Alzheimer's patients depend largely on the caregiver to fill the long hours with activities that add pleasure, reduce stress, and pass the time.

And the chances are about one in four that you or someone close to you now, or soon, faces this daily dilemma. What to do? Guess what? There's a lot you can do, as members of the Sequim and Port Angeles Alzheimer's support groups discovered when they pooled their ideas at a recent meeting.

Some of their suggestions are creative ways to make the time you still have together more pleasurable.

Other ideas are for safe activities the patient can do independently, so the caregiver can get some chores done or even spend time on a hobby or a book.

Because Alzheimer's disease and related dementia-causing illnesses are progressive, the patient will enjoy different things at different times. It may take a little ingenuity at first to sift out what's fun from what's frustrating.

Although the disease strips away many skills and memories, caregivers have found that even patients in the final stages often still appreciate a clever joke, good music, and most important of all, the camaraderie of a group of friends spending time together. And isn't that what life's all about anyway?

## **Guidelines For Successful Activities**

### *Limit distractions*

- ❖ Keep noise levels low.
- ❖ Voices should remain calm.
- ❖ Avoid cluttered environment.

### *Keep it simple*

- ❖ Select one activity at a time.
- ❖ Keep projects on a small scale.
- ❖ Do things one-step at a time.
- ❖ Repetitive movements are easiest.
- ❖ Keep activities on an adult level.
- ❖ Take advantage of old skills; (previous hobbies may or may not be successful).

### *Proper Communication is Key*

- ❖ Establish eye contact and smile often.
- ❖ Speak clearly and use short sentences.
- ❖ Use gestures when appropriate and visual cues.
- ❖ Allow opportunity for expression, and listen for meaning.
- ❖ Don't argue over correct answers.
- ❖ Use frequent reinforcement.

### *Always Remember*

- ❖ When establishing a routine, evaluate the attention and frustration level.
- ❖ Be patient, flexible, and spontaneous.
- ❖ SAFETY!!! Use safety scissors, plastic needles, non-toxic materials, non-breakable items.

## **SPECIFIC ACTIVITY AREAS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:**

### **Household Activities**



- Set the table: polish and sort silverware
- Fold napkins and towels
- Rake leaves
- Arrange flowers
- Wash the car
- Match nuts and bolts
- Prepare simple food recipes with stirring and peeling
- Dust, sweep, wipe counters, dry (unbreakable) dishes

**Other Household Chores:** Dusting, polishing the silver and scouring the sink are easy tasks the Alzheimer's patient can tackle. When junk mail comes, save out the reply envelopes and order forms for your companion to "prepare for mailing" while you pay the bills. Just don't mail them.

- Clip coupons

- Wipe off the table
- Put silverware away
- Sand wood
- Use the carpet sweeper
- Take care of a fish tank

### Outdoor Chores:



- Plant seeds indoors or outside
  - Weed the flower bed
  - String cheerios to hang outside for the birds
  - Force bulbs for winter blooming
  - Plant a tree
  - Rake leaves
- Put bird feed out for birds
  - Sweep the patio
  - Wipe off the patio furniture

### Exercise

Consider playing catch with a “soft” ball or taking regular walks with the individual to the grocery store or around the local mall. As previously mentioned, household tasks such as raking leaves or sweeping the floor also offer the person an opportunity for exercise. Keeping fit is important and fun for both of you. Don’t make a big deal of dwindling strength or coordination. Try to take it in stride, adapt, keep it fun.



- Aerobics, water walking, chair aerobics, weightlifting.
- Balloon volleyball, nerfball basketball, golf putting, rubber horseshoes.
- Walking, dancing, exercise bike, modified exercise program: arm circles, leg lifts, etc.
- Toss a ball

### Quiet Activities

- Write or paint
- Wind or roll yarn, lace

- Visit pets, cuddle stuffed animals
- Have a neighbor or friend visit with a “calm” pet
- Snack on childhood foods
- Rub on pleasant scented hand lotion
- Have an afternoon tea and toast
- Give a manicure
- Write a letter to a family member
- Use the TV--it’s really OK. Sitcoms with a laugh track are great for the patient, even if you find them insufferable.

## Reading

Try reading stories from a favorite newspaper or magazine. Or try reading poetry, proverbs or favorite stories.

- Read out loud from **Good Old Days**, Box 428, Seabrook, NH 03874-0428
- Look up names in the phone book
- Read the daily paper out loud
- Have a spelling bee
- Read from: **Reader’s Digest**, Pleasantville, NY 10570
- Read aloud from: **Ideals**, P.O. Box 1101, Milwaukee, WI 53201
- Read classic short stories
- Read the poem “Among My Souvenirs” by Leslie Nicholls.

## Playing With Children

Plan activities so that both the child and the person with the disease have a positive experience. But keep in mind you may need to monitor the individual’s reactions. Seeing a child cry might worry or frighten the person.

Mingle with youngsters wherever you find them, playgrounds, or McDonalds. Ask a friend or neighbor who has a baby or young child to visit.



## Self-Expression And Crafts

Many people enjoy activities that offer an opportunity for self-expression. These activities include cooking, painting, drawing, working with non-toxic clay, or caring for plants.



**Cook:** Bake up things that especially require lots of stirring: pudding, applesauce, cookies, frosting to decorate them, or mashing bananas for banana bread.

- Bake cookies
- Make jam: It's fun and easy using pectin, involves lots of mashing and stirring. Great for gifts.
- Make homemade lemonade
- Make cream cheese mints:
  - \*2 lbs powdered sugar
  - \*8 oz cream cheese
  - \*2 drops peppermint extract
  - \*food coloring as desired
  - \*Knead together and press into mint molds
- Bake homemade bread
- Make a cherry pie
- Make a fresh fruit salad
- Make peanut butter sandwiches
- Make a birthday cake
- Cook hot dogs outside
- Make homemade ice cream
- Make homemade apple sauce
- Pop popcorn

### **Other Crafts:**

- Dye Easter eggs
- Color paper shamrocks green
- Paint a sheet
- Cut out paper dolls
- Water house plants
- Make Christmas cards
- Make a May basket
- Mold with play dough
- Decorate paper placemats
- Arrange fresh flowers
- Trace and cut out leaves
- Paint with string
- Clean out a pumpkin
- Make paper butterflies
- Cut up used paper for scratch paper

## **Magazines, Albums, Picture Books**

Spend time sitting with the person and looking at pictures. Or give the individual the opportunity to look through travel magazines and cut out pictures or favorite scenes. Old photographs are guaranteed to bring memories flooding back. I recall an elderly woman in the local Alzheimer's day care center who kept one stashed in every pocket. Everyone she met became familiar with her life story as a result.

- Look at family photos, scrapbooks, magazines (children, animals and sports). Identify the people while you still can.
- Put loose photos in an album
- Color pictures
- Cut pictures out of greeting cards
- Make a valentine collage
- Make a family tree poster
- Color a picture of a flag
- Look at pictures in a National Geographic (**National Geographic Society**, P. O. Box 2895, Washington, D.C. 2077-9960)
- Make a collage out of pictures

**Yarn Cards:** Mount photos of family members on cardboard, punch holes around the edges and let the patient “sew” borders with yarn or leather thong, threaded in a yarn needle.

## **Music and Dancing**

Remember that many people with Alzheimer's disease enjoy singing familiar songs or hymns, practicing dance steps learned earlier, or playing a musical instrument. Music uplifts and overcomes disability in a magical way. Many dementia sufferers remember song lyrics and tunes long after other language skills have been lost. Take advantage of it.



- Listen to music
- Sing Christmas carols
- Play favorite songs and sing together
- Dance—Cut a rug at home to the stereo or join a group at the Senior Center
- Sing favorite hymns
- Play “My Favorite Things” from The Sound of Music.

## Separation Tasks

People who once enjoyed playing bridge or cards might find pleasure in simple card games, or, depending on ability level, in separating different types of cards. Other possibilities include separating nuts and bolts from nails or sorting buttons and coins.

- Sort poker chips
- Count tickets
- Sort objects such as beads or buttons by shape or color
- Sort playing cards by their color
- Straighten a clothes or a silverware drawer
- Put coins into a jar
- Sort greeting cards, cancelled checks, jewelry.



- Play card games like Old Maid and Go Fish, or adult games like pinochle if the caregiver plays both hands.
- Play horse shoes
- Put simple puzzles together--puzzles are fun, in descending order of difficulty.
- Play Pictionary

## Working With Cloth

Consider giving the person an opportunity to fold or work with pieces of cloth or clothing. Some people might enjoy sorting or sewing together different types of materials such as terrycloth, denim, corduroy, or cotton. Fold Clothes: Mothers of toddlers know you can make this last forever. Just mess up the piles and start all over. If you don't have a toddler handy to do the messing, do it yourself out of sight of the patient. For a change of pace, try towels, napkins, or those ubiquitous socks.



- Dress up; fancy or fun
- Match a basket of socks
- Dress in school colors on football Saturdays
- Sew sewing cards

## Observations And Excursions

Experiment with watching old movies and musicals of the 1930s to 1960s on video. Other individuals may enjoy watching sporting events, riding in the car, going out for lunch, or taking trips to the zoo, park, or art museum. The person with Alzheimer's disease needs activities and exercises that bring about a sense of involvement, accomplishment and well-being. By matching the person's abilities to the level and type of activities you can enhance feelings of satisfaction.

- **Bus Rides:** Public transit is cheap, easy, takes wheel chairs and companions. Go on a mini-adventure!
- **Eat Out:** Dine somewhere simple and inexpensive. Or take some food and drive to a beautiful and peaceful place. Picnic in the car, surrounded by beautiful scenery.
- **Visit An Adult Day Center:** Adult day centers provides many hours of respite care each week at an affordable cost.
- **Watch Things That Move:** Become mesmerized by waves, clouds, and kids. Set up a bird feeder. Let the patient watch from the window or porch while you do yard work. Wave often.
- **Explore:** Check out the neighborhood, half a block, or the corners of your backyard. Use a walker to overcome fears and unsteadiness. Use the wheelchair as a walker once in awhile to maintain strength as long as possible. Carry a small tape player or radio and listen to marching music as you go. Go on nature walks or window shopping
  - Take a ride
  - Grow magic rocks
  - Feed the ducks

## Restful Activities for Both Caregiver and Patient



**Naps:** Mr. Sandman will come with greater frequency. This is normal. Now is your chance to read that new novel.

**ZZZzzz.....:** Saw some Z's together, snuggle close. Touching is a way of communication that really will outlast the disease.

## ***Conclusion***

***These activities should not become more “work” for you, but instead should be used as interventions to make your time together more enjoyable and less stressful. Enjoy the moment!***

## **RESOURCES**

One of the best places to turn for additional help is the Alzheimer’s Association. The Alzheimer’s Association has more than 200 Chapters and 1,600 support groups nationwide, where family members of patients with Alzheimer’s disease or a related disorder share their experiences, provide each other with emotional support, hear practical suggestions and learn to rebuild their lives. The location and phone number of the Western and Central Washington Chapter is listed below. The materials for this activities booklet were compiled from:

Activities for Caregivers. Courtesy of Susan Lonn Lonn, Madonna Adult Day Services Lincoln, Nebraska

Activities for Caregivers: 101 Things To Do. Susan Lonn Lonn, Madonna Adult Day Services Lincoln, Nebraska; Alzheimer’s Association of Orange County Chapter Newsletter—Summer 1994, Revised 6/98

Emphasizing Strengths. Courtesy of the Greater Pittsburgh Chapter, Revised August 19, 1998

Having Fun With Alzheimer’s Patients. Courtesy of Sequim and Port Angeles Support Groups by Linda Stevely Schreiner, Revised August 19, 1998

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