

Caring For A Loved One With Dementia

a practical
guide
for family
caregivers
7

10 Activities To Do At Home With Your Loved One



Introduction

One of the challenges of caregiving for a loved one with dementia is finding adequate stimulation and entertainment for them.

It can be challenging because the activities that they used to enjoy may not interest them anymore. They also may not show the same level of engagement as they used to.

The benefits of keeping your loved one active are huge. Keep your loved one stimulated during the day and minimize excessive napping, and you will keep their mind sharp and improve their sleep at night.

This book features a selection of 10 fun and easy ways to keep your loved one's mind active, easily adaptable to many settings, and that you can also enjoy yourself. All the following activities last one hour or less.



1. Arm Chair Travel

Arm Chair Travel is one of many activities that can provide a person with dementia with a sensory experience. It is an opportunity for your loved one to travel the world without leaving the comfort of their home. You can use an iPad, the Internet, or the TV to showcase various travel destinations with the purpose to help facilitate some reminiscence therapy. This activity will allow your loved one to reminisce about a time in their lives when they could travel, and trigger positive emotions through memories of various travel locations.

How?

Establish a weekly (or daily) theme with your loved one. Did they have a favorite getaway or someplace that they always wanted to visit? Gather items unique to that country's culture, such as a decorations or music, and accompany it with videos and photos showcasing that location. In this situation, an especially useful tool is Google Maps. When you input an address into the app, Google shows you the pictures of the location. This trick could be used to scope out your loved one's childhood home or close-up views of historical landmarks.

Duration

The duration may last from 30 minutes to an hour, and may vary according to how much information is found on each destination.



2. Art Activity

Alzheimer's disease affects the hippocampus, the part of the brain where memories are consolidated. It moves to the part of the brain where language is processed and then to the logic center where problem solving is controlled. Emotions and creativity remain viable for a longer time, allowing patients to express themselves through more creative means.

Art Therapy is designed to stimulate your loved one mentally, socially and physically. It will ease and prompt discussion between your loved one, you, and other people, while partaking, exchanging ideas or reminiscing about the past.



This activity will allow for your loved one to reminisce about a time in their lives that corresponds to the pictures you are going to show them. Art will enable your loved one to actively participate in creative activities. It is an excellent source of self-expression, sense of purpose, mental and physical stimulation while providing pattern recognition and prediction.

How?

The sky's the limit when it comes to art; you can supply your loved one with markers and paper or even just a coloring book. You can find photos or paintings of specific topics or just let them draw whatever is on their mind.

Here are a few examples:

- Coloring Book
- Postcards
- Show your loved one how to create a gradient of colors



Duration

Individuals with dementia can stay engaged doing art for an hour or more .



3. Passive Activities

Folding Towels

The task of folding laundry is a fundamental instrument in activities of daily living. It may seem like a rudimentarily mundane task but there is a physical benefit associated with the reaching, grasping, lifting and other actions involved in folding laundry. When the laundry basket contains a variety of different items, there is cognitive aspect as the person considers their next selection and chooses it for their own reasons – color, size, etc. By involving your loved one in this chore you are keeping them active, and giving a sense of purpose for their day.



How?

Sitting at a table the caregiver will put a laundry basket of various clothing items and towels in it. The caregiver will instruct the patient to start folding, allowing for the patient to pick and choose which ever items they see fit. This task can easily be repeated throughout the day by refilling the laundry basket after the patient has folded the items.

Robotic Therapy Pets

While it may not always be convenient to have pets in your home, especially when you are caring for a loved one with dementia, robotic therapy pets may be a great companion for them.

They have a tremendous effect on the most anxious individuals: they soothe them and alleviate their anxiety in a way that at times nothing or nobody else can. Some will name their dog and care for it like it is real, others will spend hours with the therapy cat on their lap and seem comforted by it.

The robots, which react when they are being petted, turning their heads, moving their paws, or barking and purring, are manufactured by Hasbro.



4. Current Topics

While your loved one may not be able to retain information long term, reading the newspaper and current events to them is a great way to facilitate discussions. It can help jump-start the habit of remembering today's date and having your loved one express their opinions. You can use this opportunity to talk about historical events that happened on that specific date. The activity can be therapeutic and remind patients of their past selves.



This activity will allow your loved one to know the date, historical facts and give them something to look forward to each day. This kind of stimulation is extremely important.

How?

You will lead a discussion with your loved one on the positive things that are happening in the world as well as what has happened historically on today's date. Internet or newspapers can help you come up with ideas of topics.

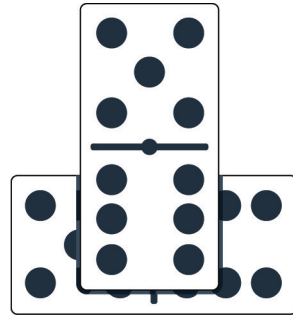
Duration

We recommend to lead this activity for at least 30 minutes in order to give time for your loved one to express themselves at length.

5. Dominoes

Dominoes have been a part of our culture for generations, for both kids and adults. Mostly likely, your loved one has played dominoes at some point of their life and is familiar with the rules of the game. Even if they haven't grown up with it, dominoes is still a great opportunity for your loved one to use their brains in a visually matching manner. This activity is mainly geared toward individuals in the early-stage of dementia and helps them find numbers and track their progress in a social way.

If you don't want to play a traditional game, you can also use dominoes for mental and physical stimulation. You can have your loved one sort the tiles by color or create a continuous number sequence. Additionally, they can practice hand movements by stacking or flipping over the tiles. This activity will allow for your loved one to keep their minds active by finding numbers, tracking their progress in a social manner.



How?

This can be for 2 to 5 people with the goal of playing all their tiles according to the rules of the game.

Duration

This game lasts approximately 1 hour.

6. Flower Arrangement

Flower arranging is an excellent activity for physical, mental, and social stimulation. Your loved one will showcase his or her creativity through the sorting of different colors and shapes. To set up, purchase fake flowers and Styrofoam vase inserts, and put them on the table for your loved one. It may be helpful to arrange one floral arrangement to use as an example for your loved one to model. Making their own flower pots will help boost your loved one's confidence and sense of purpose. They'll be able to say that they created something all on their own with little to no assistance. It can help calm agitated and stressed out individuals as well.

This activity will allow for your loved one to socialize while actively participating in creative activities. It is an excellent source of self-expression, sense of purpose, mental and physical stimulation while providing pattern recognition and prediction. It is also a relaxing, artistic, and creative activity that allows the person to use colors and textures.

How?

The caregiver will be leading their loved one in this activity, and encourage them to put together floral arrangements to be displayed in the home and instill a sense of accomplishment or pride in your loved one.



Duration

This program can last anywhere between 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Tips

To increase the level of engagement of your loved one in this activity, tell them that the arrangements will be used for a party or given as a gift.

Individuals with dementia generally still love to give and their sense of compassion and generosity can be very present.

7. Meditation

Meditation is a mind-body practice with many methods and variations that are all grounded in the silence and stillness of present-moment awareness. Evidence of meditation's health effects has been well documented: the practice offers improvement in the symptoms of various disease conditions in addition to the experience of a deeper spiritual connection.

These positive changes that occur during meditation are associated with greater activity of telomerase, an enzyme important for the long-term health of cells in the body. Telomerase has been associated with a reversal or slowing down of the aging process as well as an improvement in immune function.

Meditators demonstrated the greatest improvement on various psychological measures and purpose in life (viewing one's life as meaningful, worthwhile, and aligned with long-term goals and values) and had higher levels of telomerase than non-meditators (UC Davis News and Information, 2010).

- Improved airflow to the lungs
- Increased energy level
- Decreased catecholamine levels
- Decreased cortisol (a major stress hormone)
- Increased skin resistance (due to decreased anxiety and perspiration)
- Decreased heart and respiration rates
- Decreased blood pressure
- Decreased muscle tension
- Increased alpha waves (due to increased relaxation)
- Decreased pain and pain perception



How?

Depending on the type of mediation that is to be performed the caregiver will provide examples and clear direction. Three types of effective meditation are Laughter, Focused, and Seated Meditation.

- **Laughter Meditation**

The caregiver will start with the laughter mantra (ha ha ha, he he he, ho ho ho) until laughter is voluntary, helping their loved one to come to inner peace (using the “ohm” mantra).

- **Focused Meditation**

The caregiver will use their best judgment on this technique; which requires focusing attention on a single object during the entire meditation session.

The objects may be the breath, a mantra, visualization, part of the body, external object.

- **Seated Meditation**

The caregiver will help the patient focus on the breath.

The focus should be on the movement, in and out.

Breaths in through the nose and out through the nose.

Counting can be added to help drown out the outside “noises”.

Duration

Ideally this program will last about 30 minutes.

8. Nintendo Wii

Video games are not just for kids, they can also be used for therapeutic purposes. Wii games are an opportunity for individuals with dementia to remain physically active without leaving the comforts of their home. The Wii and the TV are used to showcase various low impact physical exercises along with karaoke games.

Wii is a video game console that responds to real body movements. There are very few buttons to master and many games can be played just by swinging your arm. The Wii encourages body movement, but it can be played with varying degrees of mobility. There are many Wii games that are designed for family participation.

A few games for your loved one:

- **Wii Sports Resort**

Wii Sports gets your loved one up and moving with games like golf, bowling and tennis. Wii Sports Resort offers 12 different mini-games. Swordplay, basketball and cycling encourage players to get up and moving. Games like archery and Frisbee require excellent concentration and hand-eye coordination.



Photo credit: New York Daily News.

- **Wii Fit Plus**

Wii Fit Plus is primarily a fitness title, and comes with the Wii Balance Board, which is the centerpiece of most of its mini-games.

The Balance Board measures weight and balance. While the weight aspect mainly plays into your daily “body test” so you can keep track of your weight over a period of time, the balance feature is key to most of the mini-games. In the football game, for example, you have to stand on the balance board and lean to the left and right to block incoming balls and dodge projectiles.

Strength and yoga exercises test your ability to keep a steady center of balance as you do push-ups, crunches and various yoga positions.

- **Big Brain Academy: Wii Degree**

Big Brain Academy: Wii Degree claims to keep the mind sharp and focused in a similar way as crossword puzzles, Sudoku, reading and other intellectual stimulation.

It features a range of mini-games that test the player’s abilities in categories such as math, language, and logic. You can take tests daily to get an intelligence score, play the mini-games freely, or compete in multiplayer mode. Multiplayer lets you choose from simultaneous two-player games or eight-player games where you go one-at-a-time and pass the Wii remote around, which is fun for your loved one to play with the family or with friends.

9. Physically active games

Once the disease begins to progress, it’s important that your loved one still maintains some physical activity in their day. Physical activity can range from doing standing calf raises to walking to the bathroom. Exercise options vary on the patient’s stage.

Early to middle stage patients can enjoy more vigorous activities such as:

- Gardening
- Bodyweight workouts
- Dancing
- Walks at the park



Exercise can also be beneficial for late-stage individuals, if it is possible. Activity is more basic, using simply movement and balancing exercises. Some options include:

- Moving chairs regularly
- Balance in a standing position
- Sit unsupported for a few minutes each day
- Cornhole game
- Body weight workouts:
 - o Air squats
 - o Body weight curls
 - o Body weight shoulder press
 - o Body weight triceps extension
 - o Body weight seated and standing calf raises

- Folding Laundry
- Standing calf raises while brushing teeth

Important things to remember:

- Sitting and standing every hour is physical activity
- Walking to the bathroom is physical activity
- Activities of Daily Living are physical in nature (Activities of Daily Living, or ADLs, are routine activities that people tend to do every day without needing assistance. There are six basic ADLs: eating, bathing, dressing, toileting, transferring (walking) and continence).

10. Music and Memories

In her study about music and dementia, lead author Linda Maguire wrote, “Musical aptitude and music appreciation are two of the last remaining abilities in patients with Alzheimer’s.” Even in the most advanced stages, music can still ignite emotions in patients and stimulate positive emotions.



Music and Memories is a personalized program designed to ease your loved one's agitation and anxiety.

Use the internet to find music that your loved one recognizes and associates with. Place an iPod or device in your loved one’s pocket and the headphones on his/her ears.

If you’re not sure what music to choose from, here are a few pieces to start out with:

- Sound of Music
- Somewhere Over the Rainbow (Wizard of Oz)
- Wish Upon a Star (Pinocchio)
- Hound Dog
- Good Golly Miss Molly

This activity will allow for your loved one to reminisce about a time in their lives that correspond to the music in hopes to ease their anxieties and agitations. The purpose is to support your loved one’s dementia behavioral expressions and assist with easing symptoms that may make engagement challenging for them.

Duration

You should have enough material to keep your loved one engaged for 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Conclusion

Keeping your loved one active and engaged can help stimulate their brain and slow down cognitive decline. By choosing activities you both have an interest in, you and your loved one can spend quality time together and enjoy the moment while creating new memories or sharing old ones.

Resources

Robotic Pets

www.joyforall.hasbro.com

Wii Sports

www.nintendo.com

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