
2 Making the Activities a Success: Essential Recommendations

Because of the mental and physical changes associated with the disease, Alzheimer's sufferers have different needs compared to other persons. Therefore, doing things with them requires particular skills, as well as the use of specific strategies and managing techniques.

In addition, elderly people with Alzheimer's disease may have disabilities that make even more difficult for them to participate in the activities. Some may be unable to use their hands or walk, for example. Others may have eyesight or hearing impairments.

This chapter provides you with essential recommendations and tips to allow every Alzheimer's elder to effectively join almost any activity, and have plenty of pleasant and exciting things to do in comfort, dignity, and safety.

Planning Individualized Activity Programs

The scope of a therapeutic activity, both with the Alzheimer's elder at home and in long-term care settings, is to improve the person's quality of life and sense of wellbeing, while providing opportunities for enjoyment, creativeness, personal satisfaction, expression, and social interaction.

In order to achieve this, activities need to be part of a program, namely a combination of various types of meaningful activities offered to the person on an ongoing basis. Importantly, the program has to be tailored to the needs of the individual, and aimed at providing specific therapeutic benefits.

Developing an individualized activity program requires you to:

- ✓ Identify the person's preferences, current and past interests and hobbies, and personal and professional history.
- ✓ Select the activities to be included in the program, taking into account the above information.
- ✓ Adapt the activities to the remaining functional and cognitive skills of the person, while addressing any disability the Alzheimer's elder may have, such as visual and hearing impairments or other physical problems.

A few other important points need to be considered when developing a therapeutic activity program:

- ✓ Always consider the cultural, ethnic, and religious background of the person.

- ✓ Arrange for alternative communication methods for elders with English as a second language (e.g., translators and printed material in the person's first language).
- ✓ Never engage the person in childish activities, or activities which involve the use of toys.

A Good Approach

There is no question that one of the most important things to learn when caring for people with Alzheimer's disease is how to approach them correctly. Moving towards them from behind making sudden movements, for example, may be interpreted as a threat. The elder can get frightened, and react by hitting, kicking and screaming.

In order to avoid this:

- ✓ Always approach the person slowly from the front.
- ✓ Establish eye contact before speaking.
- ✓ Ask permission before touching the elder.

Effective Communication

Your success in interacting with someone with Alzheimer's also depends on how effectively you can communicate with them. This means helping the person understand, and making sure they can express their thoughts.

Here are a few tips:

- ✓ Use short and simple sentences.
- ✓ Ask questions that have yes or no answers.
- ✓ Allow time to understand and respond, as this may take a little while.
- ✓ Don't interrupt.
- ✓ Use the same words if you need to repeat things.
- ✓ Be very patient and understanding. Look the person in the eyes while smiling, and listen with interest to what they say.

Adapting the Activities

As mentioned in the previous chapter, as the person with Alzheimer's goes through the different stages of the disease, their mental and functional abilities progressively deteriorate. Therefore, activities need to be constantly modified so that they match the person's remaining skills.

In other words, you need to work out every time what the person can and can't do, and choose the activities accordingly. By doing so, you will increase the person's chance to perform their tasks successfully, which, in turn, will improve their sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

Remember, too, to keep things as simple as possible. For example:

- ✓ Break tasks down into smaller, easier steps.
- ✓ Allow plenty of time to complete each step.
- ✓ Provide concrete verbal cues. For example, say "Kick that ball!" or "Let's touch the ceiling!" if you want the person to pick their foot up, or stretch their arm above their head, respectively.

Sometimes, however, making the elder participating in the activity can be a real challenge. Try to involve the person by saying things like "It's time for reading our book together, I really need your help!" If you make clear that their presence is necessary in order to make the activity happen, they are more likely to accept your offer and join in.

It is also helpful to learn about the elder's current preferences and past interests. They may have enjoyed a particular hobby, practiced a sport, or belonged to a professional body they are proud of. The more information of this kind you gather and use in planning the activities, the more these will be appealing, motivating, and meaningful to the elder.

And, don't forget that, whatever you decide to do, your main goal is to provide the person with an enjoyable, pleasant, and interesting experience.

Treat with Respect and Ensure Success

When working with people with Alzheimer's, be sure you treat them with respect and dignity:

- ✓ Treat them as adults and avoid infantile talking.
- ✓ Say please and thank you.
- ✓ Don't talk *to* them, but *with* them.
- ✓ Choose activities that the elders are able to perform successfully.

It's also very important to make the activities free from the pressure of giving an answer. Ask questions by addressing the whole group rather than asking participants directly. And, remember that no answer is wrong.

Addressing Physical Disabilities

Poor eyesight, hearing deficits, being wheelchair bound, and other impairments can limit the extent to which Alzheimer's sufferers can be involved in activities. And sometimes they may even cause the person to become socially isolated and depressed.

Nevertheless, there are things you can do to help all Alzheimer's elders enjoy participating in activities, regardless of their disabilities. Here are a few examples:

- Set up a words chart to allow elders with speech impairments, or language difficulties, to express their thoughts by pointing at the words.
- As far as possible, arrange for volunteers to help with Alzheimer's elders who cannot use their hands. A volunteer can be of great help to these elders, and do many things for them, including drawing, painting and writing.
- Write one-step instructions on a blackboard, or a large sheet of paper taped to the wall, so that elders with Alzheimer's and hearing difficulties can read what they cannot hear. You may also provide cut out pictures that illustrate their task; and put labels on objects and tools, as well as on drawers and closets. Use behavioral language and keep background noise down. If the elders wear hearing aids, do a listening check to ensure they are working properly, and check their batteries.
- A little bit of imagination and creativity, and almost any activity can be adapted to the requirements of wheelchair-bound elders, too. For example, they can be involved in physical training classes that include gentle exercises for the upper body. They can also enjoy dancing, by simply moving their hands and arms to the rhythm of music. And they can participate in many outdoor gardening activities, such as watering and pruning potted plants that are brought to them at a table.
- Increased lighting can help Alzheimer's sufferers with poor eyesight. The same goes for engraved objects and tools, since they are easier to recognize, especially during garden activities. Also, try to keep everything in the same place, and avoid tools with sharp edges or points. Consider magnifying glasses and large print books, magazines and game cards.

When and How Much is Best?

Alzheimer's symptoms tend to get worse in the late afternoon or evening, a phenomenon called "sundowning." At this time of the day, the person becomes increasingly agitated, anxious and confused, so doing things with them is very difficult, if not impossible.

According to experts, the best time for the activities is at mid-morning or mid-afternoon, when the person with Alzheimer's is usually calmer and more relaxed, and can concentrate on their tasks, and gain benefit from them.

In any case, avoid scheduling complex and lengthy activities one after the other, as this may cause the elder to feel tired and overwhelmed. Instead, plan activities that last no more than 30 to 40 minutes, and allow for periods of rest between them.

Carrying Out the Activity

Before starting the activity, spend some time introducing it, so that the person knows what you are about to do together. Talking slowly and clearly, explain the activity step by step. Whenever possible, use colored pictures or drawings illustrating tasks and necessary tools, to help the person understand.