20 Practical Activities for people living with Alzheimer’s Disease

Developing practical, efficient and meaningful leisure programs for people with Alzheimer’s Disease requires creative thinking.

What is Alzheimer's Disease?

Alzheimer's Disease is a chronic and progressive condition characterized by the decline of cognitive functions such as reasoning, remembering and planning. It affects people in different ways; no two individuals will experience exactly the same progression of the disease. A person's personality, health and social situation are all important factors that influence the impact of dementia.

Related: What is dementia? Alzheimer's Disease vs Dementia

Finding activities for the elderly with Alzheimer's

Structured group activities very seldom work. Simple, brief activities offered several times a day are the most effective and beneficial types of activities for Alzheimer's.

Activities such as housework and simple games can help to maintain motor skills. Listening to music is also a very calming and engaging activity.

The focus should be on the person and not the condition. Try to match people with activities that suit their background and experience.

What sorts of activities are most effective?

The following ideas may be used on a one-to-one basis and others may be suitable for small groups depending on their abilities. Some of the activities suggested are Montessori based, developed to promote and maintain existing skills.

Some activities such as sorting, pairing, matching and puzzles should be offered once and then repeated twice during the week. Despite having poor recollection, people living with Alzheimer's can still learn through practice and repetition.

Most activities that require movement: grasping, pressing, pushing, gripping, extending, scooping and reaching are helpful in improving hand-eye coordination. These types of activities also provide sensory stimulation and promote well-being.

If utensils or tools are to be used, make sure they are adapted to the needs of individuals. Supervision
at all times is essential.

20 Activities for people living with Alzheimer's Disease

1. Fiddle Box

Check your resident's profile and collect items according to his/her previous profession or occupation. Place items in a box and present it to the resident two or three times a day for a 'feel, touch & explore'.

Related: [Fiddle boxes & other ideas to stimulate the senses](#)

2. Deck of cards

Give your resident a deck of cards to be separated into suits: spades, hearts, diamond and clubs. All other cards should be removed from pack.

3. Music

Play folk or popular music from your resident's era – this never fails to please. Give residents
percussion instruments to add to the fun.

Related: Free Music Playlists for the Elderly

4. Rubber Tipped Darts Game

This can be played by one or two people, each having three darts to throw. It does not injure players or damage walls.

5. Untying Knots

Buy a medium rope and tie a few simple knots. Ask resident to 'help' you untie the knots.

6. Threading Yarn or String

Buy large pasta loops for residents to string together with a thick yarn or thin rope.

7. Doll Therapy

Despite this being somewhat controversial, in my experience doll therapy works well and I would recommend recreation staff try it. The dolls should be dementia specific (and look like newborn babies). Buy a bassinet, a baby bath, a cot and lots of baby clothes. Female residents love to change clothes, wash, and put baby down for a nap.

Related: Doll Therapy and Dementia

8. Display of Insects

A display of worms or ants in a large glass container (placed in a secure place) is a good subject for conversation.

9. Fabric box

Provide a large cardboard box with dozens of pieces of assorted fabric inside it; silk, lace, felt, velvet, acrylic and wool. Sit 3 or 4 residents around a table and place fabric box in reach of all. Touch, feel and fold.

10. Beach ball

Buy a large beach ball and let sitting residents roll or kick it to each other from their chairs.
11. Fish tank

This provides visual stimulation and is a good topic for conversation.

Related: Snoezelen Rooms & Sensory Environments

12. Matching shapes

Matching shapes or pictures is a fun game combining sensory stimulation and thinking skills.

Related: Matching Shapes Activity

13. Pairing & Sorting

Similar to the above; residents will match pictures, shapes and other objects together.

Related: Pairing & Sorting Activity

14. Pom-Poms

Give residents colored pom-poms and provide containers of the same color. Residents will place pom-poms in the matching colored container.

Related: How to Make Pom-Poms

15. Golf Balls

Another inexpensive 'sorting by color' activity. Buy second hand golf balls and paint or spray in different colours. Give resident an ice-cream scoop to scoop the golf balls into containers of the same colour.

16. Picture Puzzle

Enlarge a photo of the resident or one of his close relatives. Laminate it and cut into four odd pieces for resident to put together. Alternatively: a colorful picture of a car, fruit or landscape also works well.

Related: Picture Puzzle Activity
17. Activities relating to the individual’s former life.

For instance, a carpenter may enjoy sanding a nice piece of wood, a post office worker may enjoy stamping envelopes, a home-maker may enjoy arranging pots and pans on a shelf etc.

Related: Daily Living Activities

18. Reminiscing

Long term memory can be retained by people living with dementia even as the illness progresses. Here are some suitable reminiscing activities:

Related:
- School Days Reminiscing Cards
- Reminiscing Activities with Elders
- Story Book Reminiscing

19. Cutting pictures out of old calendars

Use safety scissors to cut pictures from calendars; collect enough pictures to make a poster to maintain dexterity and provide a sense of accomplishment.

20. Cup cake decorations

Buy a few dozen cup cakes. Make icing in two colours and put into piping bag. Assist residents to ice one or two cupcakes until they feel confident to do it on their own. Alternatively a plastic spatula will keep them busy and entertained for a while.

Related: 15 Activities for Late-Stage Alzheimer's Disease

We'd love to hear your feedback on activities for the elderly with Alzheimer's. What has worked for you?