Montessori-Based Activities

Finding activities that people living with dementia are able to participate in and enjoy can be challenging.

The Montessori Approach for Dementia Care is a method of working with seniors living with cognitive disorders.

Origins of the Montessori Method

Maria Montessori was an Italian doctor and educator who, in the early 20th century created an educational method of rehabilitation to teach children with mental disabilities. The method eventually expanded to encompass a new way of teaching mainstream children.

Around thirty years ago, Dr Cameron Camp, an American research scientist in the field of ageing, adapted the Montessori method to treat people suffering from Alzheimer’s and related disorders.

Dr Camp’s adaptation of the Montessori method seeks to engage the senses and evoke positive emotions. It involves stimulation of the cognitive, social, and functional skills of each individual.

Learning About The Montessori Method for Dementia Care

If at all possible, activity professionals should receive orientation and training from a Montessori-Based Activity Professional. Alternatively here are 2 useful resources:

- Montessori-Based Activities for People with Dementia Manuals available in two volumes - easy to follow with detailed descriptions for each activity: Montessori-Based Activities for Persons with Dementia, Vol 1
- Free dementia care pdf provided by Alzheimer’s Australia: Relate, Motivate, Appreciate: A Montessori Resource.

There are also organisations providing consultancy, training and information on the Montessori approach, contact details can be sourced online.

One-on-One if Possible

The original Montessori Method for Dementia Care recommended a one-on-one approach, which posed a challenge to many facilities. In general, the staff-client ratio in assisted care facilities rarely has the means to support this.
This situation can be circumvented if your facility has a strong volunteer program. Activity staff, after being thoroughly trained and familiarized with the underlying principles of the method could then instruct volunteers and family members to facilitate activities.

Related: 12 Tips for One-on-One Visits with Seniors

The Guiding Principles of the Montessori Method

Research indicates that Montessori activities elicit strong positive engagement in one-on-one settings. However small group settings (2 to 4 people) can also work.

The implementation and application of Montessori-based activities is more specialized than other activities that may form part of your monthly activity program. It is very important to follow the Montessori principles to achieve the therapeutic results.

10 Fundamental Principles of the Montessori method:

1. Use Everyday Materials
Use everyday materials that can be held and manipulated.
2. Match Interests & Skills
Activities should match interests and skills of participants.

3. Use Past Experiences & Preferences
Activities should take into account past experiences and preferences of participants.

4. Adapt According to Cognitive & Physical Status
Adapt activities to the cognitive and physical status of participants.

5. Simplify as Much as Necessary
Break down activities into smaller steps according to needs.

6. Match Speed to Ability
Match the speed of the activity to the abilities of participants.

7. Progress from Simple to Complex
Progress from simple to complex and from concrete to abstract or vice versa as needed.

8. Demonstrate
Demonstrate the activity. While demonstrating place something related to the activity in the hands of participants.

9. Encourage & Assist
Encourage and assist with a minimum of vocalization (serene atmosphere).

10. Evaluate
Evaluate each session to determine if the activity was successful or requires modification.
How to Conduct a Montessori-Based Session

Assemble activities together into kits and then:

- **Prepare the environment**
  Activities should be contained in labelled kits and placed on shelves with easy access for residents to see and choose from.

- **Set up the room**
  Set up a table for activities, diminish noise and remove distractions. The smaller the group the better e.g. no more than 3 to 4 participants.

- **Invite**
  Invite and motivate participants to walk with you to the shelf and choose the kit they would prefer.

- **Demonstrate**
  Demonstrate the activity with as few words as possible and then hand it to them and suggest they do likewise.

- **No Pressure:**
  The focus should be on progress (engagement, enjoyment, and feedback) not the outcome.

- **Guidance:**
  Every participant should have an activity that he can successfully handle. The facilitator should sit at the dominant side of a participant and provide guidance as needed.

  Sometimes participants may want to use materials to create something other than the activity it was created for. If participant engagement is strong, let them be. There is no right or wrong way. Later, you may (or may not) offer assistance by asking if they think there is another way of doing the activity; demonstrate again if necessary.

- **Thank you**
  At the end of the session, thank participants and invite them to another session.

**How to Create Activities Based on the Montessori Approach**

Once you are well versed in the principles of the Montessori Approach for Dementia Care you will be able to create your own activities.

Here are a few activities based on the Montessori Approach you can find on Golden Carers:

- **Matching Shapes**
• Matching Colours
• Colour Sorting
• Picture Puzzle
• Pairing & Sorting
• Sensory Boxes

Issues that may arise

Be aware that issues are bound to arise during a session; participants may get agitated or bored, or may infringe on the space of their peers.

Here are some things that can happen and some suggestions on how to handle them.

• Lose focus
  Re-establish eye contact, speak gently and softly, touch their arm or shoulder and ask for their ‘help’ a little longer.

• Walk out
  Use the same approach as above, and if unsuccessful, walk with them for a little while and then invite them to return to the table.

• Lose interest
  Start working on the activity yourself and then hand it back. If that fails, let them have another choice of activity.

• Place small objects in their mouths
  Thorough supervision is necessary at all times.

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We'd love to hear your feedback.
Do you have any Montessori Inspired Activities to share?