

Worksheet 2:

The importance of activity

Understanding the needs of each person with dementia is EVERYONE's responsibility. Some may clearly enjoy the leisure activity 'events' provided. However, others might not. Some may sit passively accepting what is being provided and others may react very strongly. Everyone needs to be observant and mindful of the responses of all people living with dementia, and be proactive in taking appropriate action.

Successful activities happen when the demands of the activity match the abilities of the person. It is therefore important to understand what those abilities are. Does everyone understand the abilities and limitations of all people living with dementia in their care? By understanding both, we can help a person to build on their strengths and compensate for their difficulties.

Engaging in meaningful activity is best supported when combined with knowledge about the biography of the people living with dementia. Knowing their former lifestyle, work history, hobbies, recreational and social interests, travel, significant life events, spiritual and cultural preferences, family dynamics, relationships, likes and dislikes, celebration rituals and so on are essential elements of person-centred activity provision.

It is important to consider what makes the person living with dementia happy and sad. It would be beneficial to know one/some of their favourite funny stories, the name of a preferred comedian and/or entertainer, and to have access to photos and/or film footage of them 'in action'. Having knowledge of (and therefore actively avoiding) the fears and anxiety triggers of each person with dementia is also hugely valuable (e.g. talking among groups of people, darkness, loud noises, etc).

Activities should help to re-establish familiar roles, and support the person with dementia to make use of habitual, learned tasks. Examples include washing and preparing vegetables, buttering bread, laying tables, clearing the table after meals, washing up, drying dishes, dusting, folding clothes, polishing brass or silver, sweeping the patio, raking leaves, emptying the grass catcher, hosing the car, bringing in the washing and watering the garden. These activities can provide a sense of purpose through being useful. We should all encourage an area of responsibility – no matter how small. In view of the changing abilities of the person with dementia, we should be prepared to adapt activities so we don't set them up to fail.

We all need to know what has contributed most to a person's self-esteem and how they might continue this. For example, we can encourage the person with dementia to clean and/or polish their own shoes, to be 'pampered' with a manicure or 'make-over', to have their hair dressed to their preference, to apply (with assistance if required) their preferred aftershave lotion or perfume, or to wear their favourite style of clothing. If appropriate, the person with dementia should be encouraged to maintain all of their own personal care (bathing, showering, hair, makeup, toilet routines, teeth cleaning, dentures, glasses, hearing aids, etc.). If the person with dementia is unable to do any or all of these things independently, then appropriate support should be provided to enable and maintain the person's own approach, choice and preference.

Activities should give relaxation and pleasure. These do not require memory – for instance, a person with dementia may enjoy an outing but not know where he or she has been. They may respond to a rhythm but not know the tune. The person may enjoy a spa bath but not recollect why it felt so good. It is important that the moment is enjoyed even if the experience may soon be forgotten.