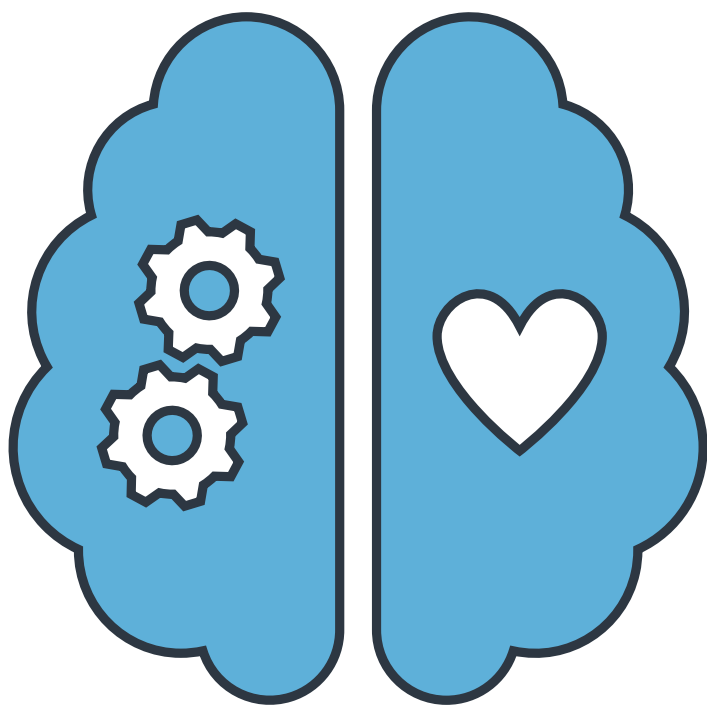


# Dementia-Friendly Activities Toolkit

A guide for engaging persons  
living with dementia



LIVE WELL  
SAN DIEGO

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## Acknowledgments

This resource is brought to you by the Age Well San Diego Dementia & Brain Health Team and Social Participation Team. Age Well teams are comprised of older adults and representatives from a variety of community organizations. The teams are coordinated by the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, Aging & Independence Services. To learn more about Age Well San Diego and how it fits into the County's comprehensive framework on aging services, the Aging Roadmap, visit [www.livewellsd.org/agingroadmap](http://www.livewellsd.org/agingroadmap).

# Introduction

No matter our age or cognitive ability, staying physically and mentally engaged is important for well-being. Doing so can boost mood, support brain health, foster connection with others, and contribute to a better quality of life. However, for people living with dementia, staying engaged can become more challenging due to their brain changes.

Caregivers and family members play a vital role in supporting meaningful engagement, but finding relevant activities isn't always easy. This toolkit was designed to simplify that process and help create dementia-friendly opportunities. By using a dementia-friendly approach to activities and interactions, communication can improve, frustration may decrease, and shared time can become more enjoyable for everyone involved.

## ***Integrating Dementia-Friendly Practices***

Dementia-friendly practices are simple, thoughtful approaches that support the unique needs of people living with dementia. These may include giving the person extra time to respond, using simple language, or offering familiar, comforting activities. Most importantly, they focus on what the person *can* do and recognize the importance of their remaining strengths, interests, and abilities to foster engagement and dignity. By engaging in a dementia-friendly way, you are helping to create a more inclusive and supportive community. This guide is designed to support your efforts to provide meaningful, respectful, and empathetic activities—whether at home, in a day program, or within a residential care setting.

*"Engagement is not about keeping people busy; it's about connecting with them in a way that gives them purpose and meaning."* - Teepa Snow, Dementia Care Specialist

# Person-Centered Care

***Person-centered care is the foundation of meaningful support for people living with dementia.***

Person-centered care means focusing on the whole person, not just their diagnosis. It's about honoring their unique history, values, routines, interests, and preferences. This approach sees the person first, not the disease. When you meet one person with dementia, you've only met one person with dementia. In the context of activities, person-centered care means choosing or adapting experiences based on what brings that person joy, meaning, and connection. Below are some questions to help spark conversations and get to know somebody better.

## **Basic Information**

- What name do they like to be called?
- Where did they grow up?

## **Life Story**

- What kind of work did they do?
- What are they most proud of?
- Were they in the military or part of another group?

## **Interests & Comfort**

- What kind of music do they enjoy?
- What hobbies or pastimes have they loved?
- Do they like being outside?
- What activities help them feel calm or happy?

## **Daily Routines**

- Are there important routines or habits in their day?
- What time of day do they usually feel their best?
- Do they have favorite foods or drinks?

## **Sensitivities**

- Are there things they dislike or that cause stress?
- Are there any topics that should be avoided?
- Do they prefer quiet or social time?

## **Purpose & Joy**

- What gives them a sense of purpose?
- What makes them laugh or smile?

# Quick Tips to Get You Started

**Focus on the person** – Match people with activities that suit their abilities and skills, personality, and other interests.

## Practice dementia-friendly communication skills

- **Be aware of your feelings** – Use positive, calm, friendly facial expressions and tone when speaking.
- **Avoid arguing or correcting** – Listen and try to find the meaning in what they are saying, as well as any underlying emotions, such as fear or sadness.
- **Be an active listener** – Show that you care about what they are saying and encourage them to continue.
- **Encourage nonverbal communication** – Ask the person to point or gesture to help with communication.

## Cultivate supportive environments

- **Adequate accessibility** – Try to ensure paths are level, non-slip, and a single color.
- **Keep things simple** – Ensure your activity has a straightforward layout with clear and simple directions.
- **Easy materials and tools to use** – Consider using ergonomic tools (e.g., raised beds when gardening).
- **An opportunity to relax** – Provide a calm environment with seating so that the person and others have an opportunity to enjoy the moment.
- **Consider physical comfort** – Check temperature, sound, lighting, and other possible stressors in the environment.

## During activities, remember:

- The activities are not intended to be strictly followed; be flexible and make adjustments as needed.
- Note what works best (e.g., favorite activities, setting).
- Some activities may be used on a one-to-one basis, others may be suitable for small groups.
- The goal in dementia-friendly activity planning is stimulation and connection to emotional experiences; not the recovery of memories.
- Do the activities *with* them, and not *to* or *for* them.

# Social Engagement Activity

Social engagement is a key component in maintaining a good quality of life. People in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease or related dementia may still enjoy going out to places they enjoyed in the past like a favorite park, restaurant, museum, or just having family and friends visit them.



Photograph by Alzheimer's San Diego: Connections outing.

***"...my mom loves all the activities, being free, alive."***

**— Participant in Social Outing Activity —**

## Activity Idea: Social Engagement

### When Planning:

- Plan activities for indoors or outdoors:
  - **Indoors** – Bring coloring books, magazines, movies, puzzles, or games.
  - **Outdoors** – Schedule some time for a walk or spend time in a garden.
- Invite friends and relatives to join you or bring grandchildren's artwork.
- You can use and expand on some of the activities outlined in this toolkit.

### Conversation tips:

- Make eye contact and call the person by name to get his or her attention.
- Speak slowly and clearly and repeat information as needed.
- Avoid quizzing. Reminiscing may be healthy, but avoid asking, "Do you remember when?"

### Additional Tips for Planning a Visit:

- **Plan activities during the day** – People with dementia may not be at their best in the late afternoon.
- **Stick to a schedule** – Keep outings from becoming too long and exhausting.
- When out in the community, carry a business-size card with tips and reminders on how to engage with the person with dementia. Sharing this information with members of the community (e.g., store clerks, tellers, neighbors) can make for more positive interactions.
  - For example, the card could say: "My family member is living with dementia. They might say or do things that are unexpected. Thank you for your understanding."

# Art Activity

Art projects can create a sense of accomplishment and purpose. They can provide the person with dementia and caregivers an opportunity for self-expression.



Photograph by Alzheimer's San Diego: Memories in the making.

***"My mother's mind is stimulated, and she can see that she can still create art. She also enjoys the socializing. It is a very positive environment for her and me."***

— Participant in Art Activity —



## Activity Idea: Creative Coloring

### Materials:

1. Colored pencils, markers, crayons
2. Coloring books or printable drawings



### Steps:

1. Begin by creating a relaxing environment. Consider soft music in the background.
2. Pick something to color. Use an age appropriate coloring book or print-outs.
3. Choose coloring supplies and lay them out on the table.
4. Begin coloring!
5. Provide encouragement, discuss what the person is creating or reminiscing about.

### Modifications:

- Use simpler drawings for those in advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease or related dementias.

### Tips:

- Avoid anything too child-like.
- Choose pictures that they can recognize (cats, flowers, birds, etc.).
- This activity can be adapted to be a solo activity or an intergenerational activity.

# Physical Activity

Being active helps people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias feel better. Exercise helps keep their muscles, joints, and heart in good shape. You can exercise together to make it more fun and enjoyable.



Photograph by Alzheimer's San Diego: Movement and motion.

***"I love the positive atmosphere and all the smiles."***

**— Participant in Physical Activity —**

## Activity Idea: Seated Exercises

### Materials:

1. Chair with arms
2. Towel
3. Weights (optional)

### Modifications:

- If able, stand up to do exercises for more challenge.
- Increase weights as they become stronger.

### Steps:

1. Spend 5 minutes before your routine to warm up (e.g., walk, dance).
2. Perform various exercises (e.g., leg raises, bicep curls, ball toss) suited to their abilities.\*



Photograph by St. Paul's Senior Services

3. Cool down after the routine and perform some easy stretches.

\* See the resources in the Physical Activity section found at the end of this toolkit.

### Tips:

- Monitor participants to ensure they are breathing regularly, and be on the lookout for signs of pain or distress
- Use soup cans or a similar substitute if you do not have weights readily available.
- Demonstrate each exercise beforehand.
- A simple walking routine can also be beneficial.

# Music Activity

Music can be powerful as it provides a way to connect, even after verbal communication has become difficult. Studies have shown music may reduce agitation and improve behavioral issues.



Photograph by St. Paul's Senior Services

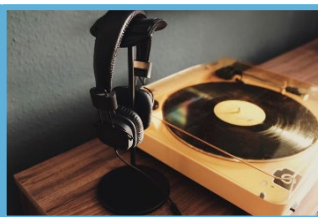
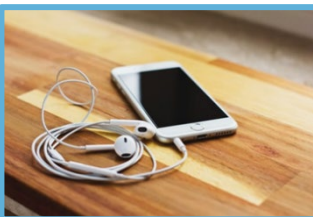
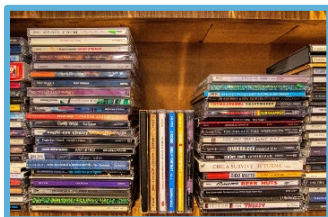
***"My mother-in-law can make music, listen to familiar music, can stimulate her brain."***

— Participant in Music Activity —

## Activity Idea: Musical Memories Reminiscence

### Materials:

1. CD, cassette, or other music player (iPod, mp3)
2. Headphones/speakers
3. Relevant visual aids (e.g. album covers)



### Steps:

1. Create a music playlist, while being mindful of selections that are familiar and meaningful to the individual.
2. Ensure there is a relaxed environment.
3. Play the playlist and observe and note the individual's response to each musical selection or track.
4. Use relevant visual aids to evoke connection with memories, and as appropriate, inquire about past activities, events, and experiences.

### Tips:

- Encourage children and/or grandchildren to enjoy music sessions with their loved one.
- Use music to create the desired mood you want.
  - Tranquil music can help create a calm environment, while a faster paced song may boost spirits.
- Encourage singing along and movement.
- To avoid confusion, choose uninterrupted sources of music (no commercials), and be mindful of the volume.
- See resources at the end of this toolkit for links to playlists.

# Cooking Activity

Many people will have spent a lot of time over the years preparing or working with food. Offering opportunities to continue this can give a sense of purpose and usefulness, which may boost confidence and self-esteem, as well as promote an interest in food and mealtimes.





## Activity Idea: Preparing a Fruit Salad

### Materials:

1. Variety of fruit
2. Fruit/vegetable peeler
3. Sink to wash fruit
4. Spoon and bowls



### Steps:

1. Have the individual living with dementia select the fruits of their choice to be included in the fruit salad.
2. Encourage the participant to smell and touch the fruit and to talk about its smell and flavor.
3. Have them assist with washing the fruit or other preparation tasks.
4. Engage in conversation by talking about where the fruit comes from in the world.
5. Encourage them to spoon the fruit salad into bowls for themselves and/or others.

### Modifications:

- If it is safe to do so, allow your loved one to assist with more difficult tasks such as peeling or chopping the fruit.

### Tips:

- Link the activity to a theme, holiday, or an event such as Easter, Christmas, or Halloween.
- Find out about a person's connection to food and mealtimes from their life experience.
- Make this activity intergenerational by including a child or teen in the food preparation.

# Gardening Activity

Nature is therapeutic. Gardening and planting can have a positive impact on the well being of individuals, including those living with dementias and other disabilities.



**Photograph by St. Paul's Senior Services:** Day Center participants plant and maintain their own urban garden.

***"My mother-in-law can express herself and be herself around people who understand and are warm and compassionate."***

**— Participant in Gardening Activity —**



## Activity Idea: Gardening

### Materials:

1. Soil
2. Trays or pots (*optional*)
3. Seeds or seedlings
4. Gardening tools (e.g., shovels, spades and hoes)

### Steps:

1. Invite the person living with dementia to select seeds or plants they would like to work with.
2. Work together to plant your seed according to the instructions that come with it. You may wish to take turn making holes in the soil, patting the dirt around the plant.
3. Water your plant regularly.
4. Maintain the garden and your participant's involvement in the process. (e.g., watering, trimming).

### Modifications:

- If an outdoor area is not available, grow a few plants inside. Even just one plant to take care of can provide a sense of purpose and enjoyment.

### Tips:

- **Planting** – Choose plants that stir the senses with vibrant colors, beautiful scents, and are interesting to touch.
- **Recommended Plants** – Carnations, Lemon Thyme, Rosemary.
- **Environment** – Select plants that will thrive in your surrounding environment.
- **Opportunity to relax** – Provide shelter and seating in the garden so that a person can sit back, take it all in, and enjoy time out with you, family, and friends.

# Independent Activities

It is okay if there are days you are unable to actively engage with your loved one. There are many stimulating activities that allow your loved one to work independently while you take care of other tasks. Independent activities are also useful when your time is limited or when you are in need of self-care.



***"When my father is happily engaged in independent activities, I can spend quality time with other members of my family."***

— Caregiver —

## Activity Ideas: Sorting and Matching

### Materials:

1. Any material that is readily available that can be sorted, such as buttons, cards, spoons, socks, and other items.



### Steps:

#### Socks Example –

1. Provide several colors of socks
2. Ask them to sort the socks by color. This step can vary depending on the materials you provide. For example, you can sort items by size or shape.
3. Help them if needed.
4. Continue repeating the task for as long as they enjoy.
5. Try changing the tasks or materials if they want a new activity.

### Tips:

- Make sure that all items provided cannot be easily swallowed.
- Let them do what comes naturally. The point is to spark an interest.
- It doesn't matter if things are done "correctly."

**Other Independent Activity Ideas:** Easy bingo, puzzles, photo albums, audio, books, old family videos

# Resources and Other Activity Ideas

## Dementia-Friendly:

1. Dementia Friendly America: [www.dfamerica.org](http://www.dfamerica.org)
2. Age Well San Diego, Dementia-Friendly: [www.livewellsd.org/dementiafriendly](http://www.livewellsd.org/dementiafriendly)

## Art and Music:

1. <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/art-music>
2. **BBC Music Memories:** offers around 1,800 clips of music from the last 100 years, which could help to explore what someone would like on their playlist. (<https://musicmemories.bbcwind.co.uk/>)
3. PlayList for Life: <https://www.playlistforlife.org.uk/>

## Physical Activity:

1. <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/ConditionsAndTreatments/dementia-activities-and-exercise>
2. [https://go4life.nia.nih.gov/sample\\_workout/6-flexibility-exercises-older-adults/](https://go4life.nia.nih.gov/sample_workout/6-flexibility-exercises-older-adults/)
3. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/staying-physically-active-alzheimers>

## Cooking:

1. <https://www.scie.org.uk/dementia/living-with-dementia/eating-well/activities-around-food.as>

## Gardening:

1. <https://lakesidemanor.org/dementia-gardens-help-people-alzheimers-dementia/>
2. <https://www.understandtogether.ie/bloom/Detailed-garden-design-info-final.pdf>

## Independent Activities:

1. <https://www.nccdp.org/resources/AlzheimersDementiaActivityIdeas.pdf>

## Other Resources Used:

1. <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/activities>
2. <https://www.alzsd.org/services/social-activities/>
3. <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/blog/steves-story-paradise-lodge-singing-with-dementia>
4. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/adapting-activities-people-alzheimers-disease>

**For programs, services, and resources for older adults and adults with disabilities visit [www.aging.sandiegocounty.gov](http://www.aging.sandiegocounty.gov) or contact us at 1-800-339-4661**