

The Washing Line – The Dementia Friendly Way

Consider how many times in our lives we hang out the washing, fold it and put it away. Such a routine activity for so many of us. One which most of us consider a task as opposed to an enjoyable activity. However for someone with dementia – doing a familiar activity can bring great joy and stimulate the senses and memories.

Communication: Hanging out the washing can stimulate lots of verbal communication and memories. You might reminisce on what makes a 'great day for drying', or whether their line was a long one from point to point or a rotary one. You could discuss what kind of pegs were used and whether they needed a long stick to hold up the middle of the line. You might also chat about the differences between laundry then and now. Non-verbal communication of open body language and relaxed facial expressions communicates an enjoyable activity.

Role: Consider how the person's role relates to the washing line. Is it something they had to do as a child for their own parents? How did it link to their own role in life as mother or father? Were they washing the local football kit for their own children? Was the washing line filled with cloth nappies? Was this activity a daily part of their young life?

Senses: Consider what senses are being stimulated when putting out washing – here are some to think about and we're sure you can think of many more.

Sight: On a good day for drying, think about the sights of the garden – the trees, shrubs and flowers; fencing or wall; birds, bees, butterflies flying by; clouds and sun in the sky or the breeze creating gentle movement throughout the garden. Consider the sight of the clothes and what clothes you might use. Consider brightly coloured socks and clothes perhaps familiar to the person – vests, aprons and maybe even including children's clothes for reminiscence. Consider differing coloured pegs and easier grips to make the task easier and to stimulate the sense of sight.

Hearing: Think about the reassuring sounds of the garden and how that can support someone with dementia. Birdsong, buzzing bees, distant lawnmowers and children laughing, dogs barking and the rustle of leaves on the tree.

Smell: Consider the smell of freshly laundered clothes – bringing a garment close to your nose to inhale the freshness of the washing powder. Consider the other smells in the garden during the activity – the flowers or cut grass.

Touch: Think about the textiles – wet to touch or dry as you take them from the line. Using the hands to fold sheets or turn socks together are familiar movements that reassure and link back to memories.

Taste: Not inherent in this activity, but consider how you could stimulate it with an ice-cream in the garden after a job well done, or a fresh cooling drink.