

Activities – The Dementia Friendly Way

A dementia friendly activity is an activity that is carried out with the aim of supporting communication, stimulating the senses and anchoring the person back to familiar roles or memories that will create joy.

Communication: Consider how the activity can support communication – both verbal and non-verbal. Is the activity best carried out alongside each other or face to face? Consider the person's eyesight and position yourself to maximise their ability to understand what you say. When comprehension is limited, demonstrate the activity so it can be copied, or place your hand on theirs to show them how. Keep your body language open and soft, and a smile on your face.

Role: Consider how the activity stimulates memory of a valued role the person has/had – e.g. mother, father, home-maker, gardener, plumber. Consider how this role can be validated and memories stimulated throughout the activity.

Senses: Consider how each sense can be stimulated throughout the activity, or if you'll focus on one or two senses and maximise the engagement in those.

Sight: Consider what the person can see during the activity. Is it something that can be carried out outside where the person can be in nature? Can you include contrast and bright colours to stimulate their sight? How much natural light is in the area where you'll carry out the activity? Are there familiar things that the person can see during the activity – pictures on the wall, trees in the garden? Think about your chosen activity and what the person will be looking at for the duration.

Hearing: Consider what the person can hear during the activity. Can it be carried out outside? Can the person hear birdsong, lawnmowers, the natural sounds of nature? Is there a preferred piece of music that will encourage relaxation or reminiscence? Can you hum a favourite tune whilst doing the activity?

Smell: Consider what the person can smell during the activity. Is smell inherent in the activity chosen, e.g. baking or planting herbs, or do you need to consider how to additionally stimulate this sense? You might use hand lotion, aftershave/cologne or a scented candle.

Touch: Consider how much touch is involved in the activity. Is the person touching different textures, textiles, e.g. soil, flour? Are they touching soft, hard or familiar textures? How much human touch is involved in the activity, e.g. holding hands, hugging?

Taste: Consider what the person is tasting during the activity. Is taste inherent in the activity – e.g. baking, or do you need to consider stimulating it separately? Consider what refreshments you might have to stimulate favourite or familiar tastes.

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.

Potting Plants– The Dementia Friendly Way

Potting plants, like any gardening is a really therapeutic activity which involves a number of the senses.

As short-term memory is limited in a person with dementia, potting plants/herbs as opposed to growing from seed can be a better choice. This will enable you to use the senses of smell and colour that are in the plants and focus the activity on potting them into a new colourful pot.

Communication: Communicating when gardening is such a pleasure with lots to discuss including the person's love for the garden, how it's changed over the years, what plants and flowers are their favourite. Discussing what flowers bring back the most memories for someone – what flowers did they have at their wedding day, in their family garden? Working alongside someone when gardening allows for calm non-verbal communication - including open body language and relaxed facial expressions and touch.

Role: Consider how the person's roles in life relate to the garden. Was it something they always enjoyed? How did they use and enjoy their garden – from being actively involved in planting to sitting out on a summer's evening reading the paper? Was their childhood garden big or small, rural or urban? Did they use herbs in their garden to cook and if so which ones were their favourite?

Senses: Gardening is one of the best therapeutic activities for stimulating the senses.

Sight: Consider how sight is stimulated by potting plants in the garden – the trees, shrubs and nature that's around the person providing the backdrop for the activity. Consider the plants themselves that you are potting – their colour, shape, variety. Consider the plant pots – their colour and contrast and vibrancy. Consider all of the other activity of nature buzzing or fluttering around that can be looked at whilst potting plants outside.

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. If gardening inside, think about a piece of music to act as a backdrop for further reminiscence.

Smell: Consider the smell of the garden and the smell of the plants that you have chosen. Consider including herbs and flowers such as basil, mint, lavender– smells that will stimulate memories.

Touch: Think about the feel of the soil as you plant – moving the soil with your hands, patting it down and adding water and how that changes the texture. Consider the small pebbles added if drainage is needed and how they feel to touch. Consider the delicateness of a plant already flowering.

Taste: Always use non-toxic plants if you are encouraging and stimulating the sense of taste. Stick to well known edible plants such as basil, mint, parsley, thyme, sage and other familiar ones the person may have cooked with. Consider introducing taste in other ways too such as cool refreshments or fruits that would have grown in the garden – strawberries or raspberries.

Painting a bird house – The Dementia Friendly Way

Painting is a lovely activity to carry out with a person who has dementia. Painting a birdhouse takes the activity outside and can open up lots of discussion around nature and wildlife. It's also a fail-safe activity as the birds are not so concerned about how perfect the paint job is.

Communication: Painting involves a lot of communication, which can start with the simple act of choosing a colour. You might discuss which is the person's favourite colour; would they like to use just one colour or add in contrast with another? Consider birds and wildlife, and how active the birds are in their garden – or indeed what are their memories of birds from when they were younger. Discuss a sense of home – what would make the birdhouse homely, and what makes us all feel at home?

Role: Consider how the person's role relates to the activity of painting. Were they someone who liked to paint throughout their life? What did they paint? Were they involved in DIY in the house – have they memories of decorating or painting over wood-chipped wallpaper to 'freshen up a room'? How did they make their home cosy and inviting like the birdhouse?

Senses: Consider what senses are being stimulated when they are painting – from prepping the birdhouse to the finished product.

Sight: Consider the colour of the paint, and any contrast that can be included in the activity. Consider how the sight of familiar tools such as a paintbrush can stimulate memories and conversations. If painting outside, consider 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.

Hearing: If painting outside, consider the reassuring sounds of the garden and how that can support a person with dementia. Birdsong, buzzing bees, distant lawnmowers and children laughing, dogs barking and the rustle of leaves on the trees. If painting indoors, consider what music could be added to create a relaxed place and stimulate further memories.

Smell: Painting outside can counteract the potentially negative smell associated with paint, or purchase a non-toxic paint and add a coat of varnish yourself later if the person with dementia is particularly sensitive to smell. Consider the natural smells in the garden as the perfect backdrop to painting.

Touch: Consider the different elements of touch and texture in this activity from sanding down the birdhouse, using a damp cloth to prepare it for paint, the bristles of the paint brush and the movement of the brush – a familiar activity that will resonate with many long-term 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.