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Adapting Activities for People with Alzheimer's Disease

Doing things we enjoy gives us pleasure and adds meaning to our lives. People with Alzheimer's disease need to be active and do things they enjoy. However, don't expect too much. It's not easy for them to plan their days and do different tasks.

People with Alzheimer's may have trouble deciding what to do each day, which could make them fearful and worried or quiet and withdrawn, or they may have trouble starting tasks. Remember, the person is not being lazy. He or she might need help organizing the day or doing an activity.

Activity Planning

Plan activities that the person with Alzheimer's enjoys in your daily routine, and try to do them at a similar time each day. He or she can be a part of the activity or just watch. Here are things you can do to help the person enjoy the activity:

- Match the activity with what the person with Alzheimer's can do.
- Choose activities that can be fun for everyone.
- Help the person get started.
- Decide if he or she can do the activity alone or needs help.
- Watch to see if the person gets frustrated.
- Make sure he or she feels successful and has fun.
- Let him or her watch if that is more enjoyable.

Try These Activities

The person with Alzheimer's disease can do different activities each day. This keeps the day interesting and fun. Here are some daily activities people with Alzheimer's may enjoy:

- Household chores: Wash dishes, set the table, prepare food, sweep the floor, dust, sort mail and clip coupons, sort socks and fold laundry, sort recycling materials or other things.
- Cooking and baking: Decide what is needed to prepare the dish; measure, mix, and pour; tell someone else how to prepare a recipe; watch others prepare food.
- Exercise: Take a walk together, watch exercise videos or TV programs made for older people, use a stationary bike, use stretching bands, throw a soft ball or balloon back and forth, lift weights or household items such as soup cans.
- Music and dancing: Play music, talk about the music and the singer, ask what the person with Alzheimer's was doing when the song was popular, sing or dance to well-known songs, attend a concert or musical program.
- Pets: Feed, groom, walk, sit and hold a pet.
- Gardening: Take care of indoor or outdoor plants, plant flowers and vegetables, water the plants when needed, talk about how much the plants are growing.
- Visiting with children: Play a simple board game, read stories or books, visit family members who have small children, walk in the park or around schoolyards, go to school events, talk about fond memories from childhood.

Going Out

People in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease may still enjoy going out to places they enjoyed in the past. For example, the person might enjoy going to a favorite restaurant, park, shopping mall, swimming pool, museum, or theater. Keep going on these outings as long as you are comfortable with them.

Plan Ahead for Outings

Here are some tips to make outings fun:

- Plan outings for the time of day when the person with Alzheimer's is at his or her best.
- Keep outings from becoming too long. Take note of how tired the person gets after a certain amount of time. Bring the person home before he or she becomes overtired.
- Use a business-size card to tell others about the person's disease. Sharing this information with store clerks or restaurant staff can make outings more

comfortable for everyone. For example, the card could say "My family member has Alzheimer's disease. He might say or do things that are unexpected. Thank you for your understanding."

Eating Out

Going out to eat can be a welcome change, but it can also be challenging. Planning can help. Before choosing a restaurant, think about its layout, menu, noise level, waiting times, and the helpfulness of the staff. Ask yourself:

- Does the person with Alzheimer's disease know the restaurant well?
- Is it quiet or noisy most of the time?
- Are tables easy to get to? Do you need to wait before being seated?
- Is the service quick enough to keep the person from getting restless?
- Does the restroom meet the person's needs?
- Are foods the person with Alzheimer's likes on the menu?
- Is the staff understanding and helpful?

Before going to the restaurant, decide if it is a good day to go. If it is, think about the best time to go. Earlier in the day may be best, so the person with Alzheimer's is not too tired. Also, the restaurant may be less crowded, and service may be quicker. If you decide to go later, try to get the person to take a nap first.

Before you leave home, gather what you need. Helpful items may include utensils, a towel, wipes, or bathroom items.

At the Restaurant

- Tell the waiter or waitress about any special needs, such as extra spoons, bowls, or napkins.
- Ask for a table near the restroom and in a quiet area. Seat the person with his or her back to busy areas.
- Help the person choose a meal, if needed. Suggest food you know the person likes. Read parts of the menu or show the person pictures of the food. Limit the number of choices.
- Ask the server to fill glasses half full or leave the drinks for you to serve.
- Order finger food or snacks to hold the attention of the person with Alzheimer's.
- Go with the person to the restroom. Go into the stall if the person needs help.

Participating in Spiritual Activities

Like you, the person with Alzheimer's may have spiritual needs. If so, you can help the person stay part of his or her faith community. This can help the person feel connected to others and remember pleasant times. Here are some tips for helping a person with Alzheimer's disease who has spiritual needs:

- Involve the person in spiritual activities that he or she has known well. These might include worship, religious or other readings, sacred music, prayer, and holiday rituals.
- Tell people in your faith community that the person has Alzheimer's disease. Encourage them to talk with the person and show him or her that they still care.
- Play religious or other music that is important to the person. It may bring back old memories. Even if the person with Alzheimer's has a problem finding the right words to speak, he or she still may be able to sing songs or hymns from the past.

Traveling Overnight

Taking a person with Alzheimer's disease on an overnight trip is a challenge. Traveling can make the person more worried and confused, so it's important to think ahead. Here are some tips.

Plan Ahead

- Talk with the person's doctor about medicines to calm someone who gets upset while traveling.
- Find someone to help you at the airport, train station, or bus station.
- Keep important documents with you in a safe place. These include health insurance cards, passports, doctors' names and phone numbers, a list of medicines, and a copy of the person's medical records.
- Pack items the person enjoys looking at or holding for comfort.
- Travel with another family member or friend.
- Take an extra set of clothing in a carry-on bag.

People with memory problems may wander around a place they don't know well. In case someone with Alzheimer's disease gets lost:

- Make sure the person wears an ID bracelet or something else that tells others who he or she is.
- Carry a recent photo of the person with you on the trip.

After You Arrive

- Allow lots of time for each thing you want to do. Don't plan too many activities.
- Plan rest periods.
- Follow a routine like the one you use at home. For example, try to have the person eat, rest, and go to bed at the same time he or she does at home.
- Keep a well-lighted path to the toilet, and leave the bathroom light on at night.
- Be prepared to cut your visit short if necessary.

Visiting Family and Friends

Spending time with family and friends is important to people with Alzheimer's disease. They may not always remember who people are, but they often enjoy the company. Here are some tips to share with people you plan to visit:

- Be calm and quiet. Don't use a loud voice or talk to the person with Alzheimer's as if he or she were a child.
- Respect the person's personal space, and don't get too close.
- Make eye contact and call the person by name to get his or her attention.
- Remind the person who you are if he or she doesn't seem to know you. Try not to say, "Don't you remember?"
- Don't argue if the person is confused. Respond to the feelings that he or she expresses. Try to distract the person by talking about something different.
- Remember not to take it personally if the person doesn't recognize you, is unkind, or gets angry. He or she is acting out of confusion.
- Have ready some kind of activity, such as a familiar book or photo album to look at. This can help if the person with Alzheimer's is bored or confused and needs to be distracted. But be prepared to skip the activity if it is not needed.

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