

Uh-oh...Here Comes Summer!

Some thoughts on activities & dementia

As summer begins, my mind goes back to those days when my children were small. A three month vacation from school would begin and I was faced with the daunting task of keeping the kids busy and happy. Previous experience had reinforced the old saying "Idleness is the mother of all vices". Yes, trouble always occurred when there was not enough to do. These same problems follow us into adulthood. We may not engage in the very same mischief as young children, but boredom can lead to problem behaviors especially in individuals with dementia.

Inactivity may be a choice for some people—I can occasionally be found swinging in my hammock doing absolutely nothing. It's wonderful for short periods of time but not healthy for days on end. Most of us have spent a lifetime working and cultivating hobbies for ourselves--nothing is more satisfying than accomplishing a task. As we grow older, it may be necessary to relinquish jobs or other activities we once found enjoyable. However, it is important to discover new ways to keep our hands and minds active.

For the individual with dementia, execution of a new or old activity can be challenging. The person may be "capable" of performing the task but unable to remember how to get started. Family, friends, and caregivers can assist by assembling the materials and helping with the first few steps. I was told of a woman with Alzheimer's disease who had once painted beautiful paintings. The disease had robbed her of the memory of how to get started. Now, her husband sets up the canvas and places paint in small cups. Once he positions the paintbrush in her hand, she is able to begin creating new works of art. Not all activities need to be as complex as this one. Enjoyment can be found in simple activities such as folding dishtowels, snapping fresh green beans, or reminiscing about the "good old days".

An activity can be almost any endeavor that is safe and meaningful to the person performing it. Most hobbies can be simplified as needed to accommodate a person with dementia. The most important element is a friend, family member, or caregiver who can plan and initiate the activity for the individual who can no longer do this on his own. It may take trial and error to discover the best activities. As Claude MacDonald once said, "What isn't tried won't work". The Alzheimer's Association website contains a list of 101 Activities to perform with the dementia patient (http://www.alz.org/living_with_alzheimers_101_activities.asp). I dare say there are most likely hundreds more if we are willing to try them. Avoid focusing on "correctness" in the performance of an activity. The primary goal is just to be involved. With a little imagination and effort, some problem behaviors can be averted. So, this summer and every season in the future, remember that "busy hands are happy hands"!

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HOF welcomes De Ann as a contributor to our newsletter!

