

# Keeping People with Dementia Engaged through Activities



*by Mary Archer*



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**Why should I pay to have my loved one with memory loss go on daytrips or attend an adult day program, when they can't even remember what they did all day?**

**Why should I bother?**



Many carepartners share this concern. It's understandable. We have to consider the financial side of professional caregiving and make sensible decisions. So when a wife asks her husband, "what did you do today?" and her husband has no answer, the wife is naturally frustrated and disappointed.

Life as we know it, has changed. We have lived for decades with a set of values and habits and tastes, and now we are forced to change. If your spouse has dementia you might find yourself now, or in the near future, having to adjust those values and habits and tastes. You didn't ask for this, neither did your spouse, and yet here it is. Recognizing and embracing this new life will help you both. There are many advantages to entering their world: living in the present, and letting go.

At one time, you may have had a smartly dressed husband who made sure he was looking his best before leaving for work. But now he seems most comfortable in his football jersey and has no trouble at all wearing it day after day!

At one time, you may have had a wife who loved to play tennis and compete in marathons. But now she is quite content to stroll through a garden and stop to smell every rose!

And at one time your spouse would sit with you at dinner and tell you every last detail about his day, but now you ask the simple question, "what did you do today?" and he has no idea.

This hurts the most when the changes seem premature. People in the earlier stages of dementia, and in particular those considered "Young Onset"

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didn't expect to slow down, retire, stop driving and change all their plans and dreams, at such an early age.



But's never easy. You will notice that the person with dementia is now more focused on the present, less focused on the future, and confused about the past. Try to walk with him in the present. By the evening, memories of today are mostly gone. You might be able to trigger a story or two about his day, but for the most part the details are simply not there. That doesn't mean his day was a loss or a waste. He might come home from six hours with a friend and not be able to recite what they did together, but the time with that friend was worthwhile.

“What did you do today?” is a challenging question for someone with dementia.

“Hi! I'm glad you're home. I was just going to grab a snack, do you want to join me?” would be more comforting to that person, and will allow you to transition into the present together.

We may have valued our beautiful wardrobe or our upcoming travel plans or our athletic abilities. We may value time talking about our day together, where we went, who we saw, and we may value sitting beside each other sharing our dreams. It might be possible to still hold onto those values, but your loved one is likely more focused on the present, and whatever is in front of him in that moment.

The present is extremely valuable to your loved one.

Your spouse is still able to experience so much that life offers.

He can have a good meal, be engaged, sing, dance, feel independent, be comforted by pets, and by nature, and enjoy watching children play. He can interact with peers, and develop new friendships. He can laugh and he can make someone else laugh. He can tell his stories, share his frustrations, be part of a discussion, be physically active, challenge himself, listen to music, appreciate beauty, appreciate art, be impressed, and reminisce. He can be enter-



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tained and he can also be entertaining. He can help someone in need, he can connect with strangers, he can be surprised, feel relaxed, feel safe, feel connected and feel loved.

Maybe that's what he did today, maybe all of that! In this new life you both have, he might not be able to tell you what he ate or where he went, but he might have felt a good deal of joy and connection, and you made that happen for him.

Resource:

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