

Finding JOY: Strategies for Meaningful Activity

When continuing care facilities reduce antipsychotics and sedatives, residents often wake up and look for something to do or somewhere to go. If we want residents to sleep at night – instead of during the day and evening, they'll need activities to stay awake and stimulated. How do we create opportunities for meaningful activities despite limited time and resources?



A 98 year old resident was wheeled to activity time in her care centre: the familiar folding of white facecloths. "I know those rags very well," she commented to her daughter in German. "I don't care to fold them anymore."

Fortunately, creative and meaningful activities don't require significant investments of time and energy or expensive equipment – just a little thinking outside the box!

Teepa Snow¹ outlines four categories of activity that fill the day and help human beings feel valued, productive and purposeful: work, self-care, leisure and rest/restoration.

Work: Do you ever wish you could win the lottery and not have to go to work?

As mundane as our everyday chores and jobs can be sometimes, they not only fill time – they give purpose. It's not about money. It's an opportunity to experience who we are and what we can do. Work is crucial to a sense of well-being and self-esteem.

- A resident is given jobs such as wiping handrails. She was a custodian before retirement, and feels less anxious with a daily purpose.
- A care centre sets up work stations where residents assist with removing caps from recyclable bottles, and stuff envelopes. After a short period of focused activity, they're tired and ready to sit down for a coffee break.
 - A former Canada Post supervisor is given 'mail' to sort daily. This greatly relieves her anxiety.
 - A retired security guard is asked to watch the medication cart.
 - A resident used to knock on every resident's door in the late evening – she had been a nurse! She now does 'rounds' with the Health Care Aide, waiting outside each door while the HCA checks on residents. Once rounds are complete, she can relax and go to bed!
- A former restaurant manager complains about the building, food or workers. "Sir, I'll check into that!" helps him feel respected and heard.
- A former receptionist sits at the nursing station and welcomes visitors.



Other ideas for meaningful work:

- Invite them to accompany you while you're doing your work, and to assist by carrying, holding or pushing a cart.
- Match various colors of children's socks. Fold baby clothes, lingerie and coloured towels.
- Tighten or loosen screws on a board
- Assist with watering plants; arrange flowers for table centre-pieces
- Assist with care of pets or fish: clean the bird cage, feed fish, brush the cat



- Shred papers for recycling
- Put together/take apart pieces of 3/4 inch PVC pipe and joints/L's/T's/caps
- Sweep floors, dust with feather duster
- Clear tables after meals

- Stock supplies
- Bake or cook with rec therapy, assist with a bake sale
- Gardening (flowers, vegetables, pick tomatoes and share)
- Put chairs in a circle for an activity, move boxes
- Decorate/undecorate for holidays/special events



Self-Care: Though occasionally it's nice to sleep in and relax in pajamas, it's satisfying to look your best, clean the kitchen, tidy the yard, organize the garage, sort through junk mail, and figure out a crossword or Sudoku puzzle. Self-care attends to our bodies, minds and environments.

The more residents to do for themselves, the better they feel! Provide choices and visual cues to maximize independence with eating, washing, dressing, brushing teeth and hair, or shaving with an electric razor.

Other self-care ideas:

- Take out the garbage, dust furniture or carpet sweep
- Help make the bed, or hold the pillow/bedding while someone else makes it
- Explore a bag of their own clothing
- Explore a rummage drawer of men's ties, handkerchiefs, jewelry
 - Match and sort activities: egg cartons with different sizes and shapes of buttons, bolts and screws, locks, pictures or parts of pictures, simple foam puzzles, and tea cups with saucers.
 - Armchair exercises: Stand or sit in front of the resident and ask them to mimic your movements. Raise and lower your arms, touch your shoulders with your fingertips, rotate your ankles, etc.



Leisure: What do you like to do for fun? How do you recharge after work and activity? Leisure activities give us joy, reduce stress, enhance mood and boost energy. Leisure activities for persons with dementia can be passive – like listening to favourite music or audio books, watching children play, or watching DVDs appropriate for the cognitively impaired: nature documentaries, old movies, cooking or sports.

Leisure activities can be active such as doing a simple age-appropriate picture puzzle, interacting with a pet, dancing, exercising or going for a walk or drive to look at the changing seasons.

Leisure activities can be social opportunities – to share a cup of tea or coffee together, and reminisce about children, pets, travel and work experiences.



- **Photo albums:** Look through, talk about the people and places. Avoid turning it into a quiz (do you remember who this is?) Instead talk about memories and experiences
- **Scrapbooks:** Make and look through scrapbooks by pasting and gluing colorful pictures of flowers, birds, puppies and textured things such as fabrics and wall-paper
- **Puzzles/crayons/art supplies:** make these available in evenings and at shift change
- **Music:** i-pods with personalized play-lists and headsets; volunteers, music and band students who play instruments for residents
- **Familiar Games:** Dominoes, Checkers, Crokinole
- **Memory Box:** Explore a memory box with items that are meaningful to the resident



Rest and Restoration: This includes sleep, but also time taken alone or with others to recharge and restore. Introverts and extroverts recharge in different ways.



Restoration may include quiet time in a room with music or a photo album, time in nature (a quiet park, gardening) or night routines such as reading the Bible and prayers. One care centre had a resident who had once been a gardener. Dirt and indoor plants mysteriously moved and appeared in unexpected places – a source of restoration *and* meaningful work for him.

Other ideas for rest and restoration:

- A courtyard or indoor garden with flowers, potted plants and natural sunlight
- An afternoon rest period when the lights are turned down, staff whisper and avoid moving noisy carts and equipment around
- 30-60 minute rest in bed
- Use a chair massage mat, along with soft soothing instrumental music, sounds of nature, a lava lamp
- Herbal or decaffeinated tea, or non-alcoholic cocktails and snacks in the evenings
- Outdoor spaces to sit in the sun, watch children play



Environments that Support Meaningful Occupation

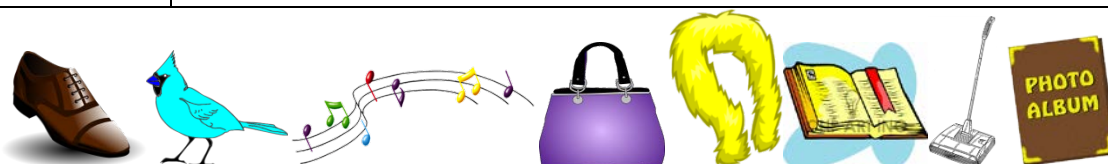
David Sheardⁱⁱ makes the distinction between **being occupied** and engaging in **organized activities**: being occupied is about filling the day with things that are meaningful to us. These can be spontaneous, singular, need little skill, take seconds, minutes or hours.

Organized activities, on the other hand, take up only a small percentage of our time (a cooking or exercise class, a day skiing with friends). They usually involve more than one person, occur at a set time and need someone to coordinate and run them. Examples of organized activities for residents include a trip to the country to watch the combines at work, a music or drumming class, a group baking or craft session, a musical crossword puzzle, making s'mores in the courtyard over a portable propane campfire, a Zumba class or polka session.



Scheduled group activities can't possibly meet the needs of every person throughout each day – but caregivers *can* create a rich environment where residents can **occupy themselves** in spontaneous, meaningful ways:

| Category | Items To Support Spontaneous, Meaningful Occupation |
|-------------|---|
| Sensory | Busy aprons and waistcoats, pictures on the walls, fresh flowers, soft blankets, music playing, pleasant food aromas: cookies, bread or muffins baking, an onion roasting in a crock pot, baskets of various colourful textured balls and bean bags, hand massage, hand-holding, soft fabric |
| Domestic | Dusters, carpet sweepers, wash tables, put away their own clean laundry, baskets of children's socks to sort, baby clothes to fold. |
| Comfort | Items appropriate to the person i.e. pictures of family, memory books, video/audio messages from family, soft blanket, stuffed animal, other items they enjoy. |
| Rummage | Boxes of handbags, trays of jewellery, drawers of clothing and bags to pack the clothing in, sewing supplies (spools of thread, buttons, lace, elastic), nuts and bolts, bits of wood, scraps of fabric and leather. Toolkit, fishing tackle box, purses with items in them. Some items could also be attached to a small fabric placemat, or to pant belt loops. |
| Cognitive | Shopping catalogues, poems, puzzles, word association games, looking at magazines, reading or listening to someone read articles from the newspaper, watch a movie and talk, Bingo, activities with playing cards according to ability (sorting by suite, putting all face-up) |
| Movement | Scarves for dancing, blowing bubbles, balloon toss, bowling pins and ball, music that promotes dancing/movement |
| Musical | Instruments, music posters, sing-along |
| Spiritual | Pictures of waves, birdsong, pictures of Bible scenes, Bibles, hymns, pussy willows (sign of hope), audio tapes of family members praying in the residents first language |
| Normal life | Sort socks in pairs, sort shoe laces and buttons, polish shoes, newspapers to look through |
| Work life | Fill envelopes, jobs from the past |
| Fun | Puppets, feather boas, DVD's (e.g. I Love Lucy), rain sticks, art items left out on evenings/weekends |
| Art | Photos, paintings, silk flowers to arrange or sort, paint supplies, colouring supplies |



But we're so BUSY!

Even in a busy day, everyone can be person-centred, touch people's lives, enjoy the moment and change someone's day through small things - Butterfly Moments.



Butterfly Moments: 5 Principles

1. Butterflies know themselves and work from feelings, from their spirit on the inside and not just from a task-focus.
2. Butterflies need environments full of "stuff" and rummage items.
3. Butterflies know how to be good at both flitting and creating 30 second activities, but also are good at being still.
4. Butterflies get rid of all negative and controlling care.
5. Butterflies need groups of people at similar points in their journey of a dementia to be matched together to enable a clear focus.

Butterfly moments are things residents can connect with and smile about:

- Stop to say 'hello' as we pass by, a comment that makes them smile
- Sing a song they like to sing, hear or sing along to as you give care
- Go to the garden to check on the flowers
- A slow stroke back rub before bedtime
- Share a few moments over a cup of tea
- Stop to share good news: an engagement, wedding, birth of a baby, children's milestones – first steps, first words, special achievements, graduation
- Chat about a family member or pet
- Look at a picture they enjoy
- Compliment on clothes/new haircut
- Help them with make-up/jewelry
- Reminisce about the past
- Massage hands with special lotions
- Bring them a basket of items they enjoy looking at (families may be able to help think of and bring in items)



- Bring a small, interesting item, and engage residents in conversation about it (a shell, decorative gourd/pumpkin, buttons, dice, miniature vintage car or truck, bowl of snow, fall leaves)
- Share a photo from your own life and talk about it (a wedding, vacation, pet) and allow them to make associations and reminisce: "Would you like to see a picture of my dog?"

Even when we're busy, we can use what we're already doing to enrich the moment. Something as simple as a request for toast can become an opportunity for meaningful connection.

Possible responses to a request for toast:

- *Non-meaningful, non-personal:* *You just ate breakfast an hour ago.*
- *More personal:* *What would you like on your toast – jam or honey?*
- *Meaningful and personal:* *Involve the person to the extent of their capabilities – e.g. give them a knife to spread the jam; reminisce about making jam and picking strawberries.*



Update the Careplan

Ensure things that help residents smile are shared with the family and with the care team, and become part of the care plan. Remember to consider residents as participants in planned recreational activities, now that they are more awake! Monitor and document the effects of these activity interventions on responsive behaviours and ask families for their input and feedback.



Summary:

Meaningful activities address underlying boredom, loneliness, frustration and lack of purpose or enjoyment. Responsive behaviours may be reduced when the person experiences pleasure, joy, relationships, a sense of purpose and enhanced well-being. A reduction in intensity or frequency of responsive behaviours may be a more realistic goal than elimination, but never underestimate the power of the little things - good feelings linger, whether it's a belly laugh, a warm hug, doing something helpful for someone else, a rousing sing-along or an interesting discovery in a rummage drawer.

References:

ⁱ [Teepa Snow](#) Positive Approach to Brain Change™

ⁱⁱ [David Sheard](#) Dementia Care Matters™