

A MEANINGFUL EXISTENCE FOR PERSONS WITH DEMENTIA

We each have *things to do* that fill our day. We dress ourselves and perform many household chores. We plan our day as we fix breakfast and send the kids off to school. We have hobbies, interests, likes and dislikes. With our skills we go off to work and with our talents we can dream and make future plans. These things occupy major portions of our days and without them we would soon become so restless and bored that we would search for new friends, tasks or interests. Having *things to do* also helps to define who we are and provides us with worth and success.

The world of someone with Alzheimer's disease or related dementia is often filled with boredom, confusion and failures. The course of this illness robs the individual of the ability to do familiar things or participate in former interest. Extended periods of idle time contribute to feelings of restlessness and ultimately lead to uselessness and agitation.

An individual with dementia needs help in finding *something to do* that restores a sense of individuality and self-worth. For the person with dementia it can be anything that keeps them involved in the world around them and reinstates normal roles of spouse, worker, consumer, friend and so forth.

The most meaningful *things to do* are those which allow the person to be involved in something that brings good memories from the past and facilitates a connection with who they are and have been during their lifetime.

When People Are Involved In *Doing Familiar Things*

- Their individuality as a person is retained and they can reconnect to previous interests and success.
- They have some control over their environment.
- Anxiety and fear of failure are removed.
- They have something to do, which structures time and normalizes the day's events.
- Being busy may help to lessen undesirable behavior such as wandering or rummaging.
- The caregiver can enjoy doing something with the person, as well as for the person.

The value in having something to do lies in experiencing pleasure and success for the "moment" it is taking place...not in the outcome or what may be produced.

General Principles to Remember

- Remember to preserve a loved one's sense of self and self worth.
- Try to see the world around them as they might be seeing it.
- All activities should be designed to provide a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction.
- Keep instructions simple, one sentence at a time. For example, "This is a ball. Watch the ball. I'm throwing it to you."
- Allow the individual the opportunity to do as much as he/she is able to do, emphasizing their self-esteem. Be careful to not ask them to do things that cause frustration or agitation. Carefully observe what the individual can or cannot do, and realize this will change as the disease progresses.
- If little interest is shown in doing an activity, don't push. Move onto something else. You may try again later.
- Give frequent praise to the individual. Measure success by the person's pleasure and enjoyment in what they are doing or have accomplished, even if it's not what you had planned. Don't feel you have failed if your expectations are not met.
- In all stages of the illness, exercise and music are important and beneficial. Walking should be encouraged. When ambulation is not possible, passive or range-of-motion exercise should be part of a daily program. Don't call it exercise. Responding to music by dancing, stretching, tapping, singing, clapping, etc., is generally well received by the individual as being normal and enjoyable.
- When talking to the individual use non-verbal communication. Use gestures and model what you want them to do. Touching, facial and body expression, and good eye contact are important. Persons with dementia often mimic the actions of others even though they do not understand the words.
- Try not to introduce anything new. The individual is having enough trouble retaining what he/she has already learned.