

The Powerful Impact of Engagement & How to Provide It at Home

One of the most crucial ingredients in good dementia care today is meaningful engagement, which is proven to have a powerful positive impact on people with Alzheimer's and related dementias. But many families wonder what it really is and how they can use it to the benefit their loved ones.

"When we talk about engagement, what we mean is supporting those living with dementia to be involved cognitively, emotionally and physically in life on a daily basis," said Holt Klinger. "It's not a matter of entertaining them, although enjoyment is certainly part of it. The focus is on keeping those living with dementia participating in the world around them to the fullest extent possible."

Because there is no cure for the disease, a primary goal of quality treatment is on delaying symptoms and improving the daily life experience. "Having cared for people with dementia for more than three decades, we know engagement is one of the most effective ways to do this," said Holt Klinger. "It can improve mood, reduce depression and behavioral expressions, and even slow dementia's progression."

One key aspect of engagement is helping those with dementia actively carry out day-to-day living routines to the best of their abilities. Offering a failure-free choice of two outfits in the morning and asking them to decide which they will wear; supporting the person to continue to help with getting a meal together – these are just two examples of how to sustain connection in day-to-day life.

"As care partners, we must resist the urge to perform tasks for our loved one without offering the opportunity to them to continue to participate," Holt Klinger said. "When people aren't actively involved to the level they could be, it can hasten the decline of their capabilities. It can also cause boredom and contribute to feelings of worthlessness and depression."

Social, emotional, physical and spiritual connection is vital engagement components, as well.

"What this means is going beyond the obvious needs of ensuring a loved one is comfortable, clean, safe, well-fed and hydrated," said Holt Klinger. "All of that is essential, of course, but we must also make it possible for them to continue to have meaningful relationships with other people, express their creativity, fulfill interests and have the sense their presence in the world matters." The feeling of no longer having value can aggravate dementia's symptoms, eroding the ability to communicate and leading to what seems to be withdrawal from everything around them.

Promoting engagement can seem a tall order for family caregivers already stretched thin from handling basic care needs, but even simple measures can make a big difference.

“Consistently encouraging participation in daily life tasks is one step,” she said. “We also suggest making sure each day includes time to foster physical, cognitive and social connections.” Examples include taking a walk, having a friend over to share coffee, enjoying music together, or drawing. Activities related to a loved one’s longtime work and other interests are also significant.

“For someone who had an office career, sorting paperwork could be relevant; a passionate gardener could look through seed catalogues and make recommendations,” she said. “What’s important is their involvement in the task, rather than the outcome. It’s about using remaining skills to participate to their highest level of capability and really experiencing it.”

Family caregivers can obtain more suggestions on creating daily engagement from the brochure **“Activities at Home: Planning the day for a person with moderate or severe dementia,”** produced by the Alzheimer’s Association.