

The Activity & Engagement Pack

Fifty things to try, sorted by what the person can still do — and an honest account of what activities do and do not change.

DAY TO DAY DEMENTIA

What this is for

Most activity lists are written for a person who no longer exists — someone who can follow three steps, hold a goal in mind, and be disappointed by failing. Handed to a family six months later, the same list produces refusals, and the caregiver concludes that *nothing works anymore*.

What has usually changed is not interest. It is the number of steps the person can hold at once. This pack sorts activities by ability rather than by theme, so that when one column stops working you move down to the next one instead of giving up.

What the research actually shows

Worth knowing before you invest hope in a craft box. A 2023 Cochrane review of personally tailored activities in long-term care found **low-certainty evidence that they may slightly reduce agitation** (standardized mean difference -0.26 , 95% CI -0.53 to 0.01 ; 7 studies, 485 participants), and **moderate-certainty evidence of probably little or no effect on negative mood** (-0.02 , 95% CI -0.19 to 0.14 ; 6 studies, 632 participants). The reviewers could not describe an optimal program.

So the honest case for doing this is not that it treats the disease or reliably lifts mood. It is that a filled hour is not an empty one, that agitation may ease a little, and that the person doing the caring gets something other than tasks to share. Those are enough. They are also different from what the packs on Facebook promise.

The one thing that does predict success. Across this literature, the activities that work are the ones matched to a person's *tested* current ability and prior interests — not to their diagnosis, and not to what the group leader had prepared. That is the whole method, and it is why this pack is sorted the way it is.

How to use it

- Start in the column that matches **today**, not the one that matched last year. If in doubt, start one column lower — success is what makes them come back tomorrow.
- Offer, do not ask. “Come and fold these with me” works where “Would you like to do an activity?” gets a no.
- **Twenty minutes is a full session.** Stopping while it is still going well is the trick most families learn late.
- Do it at the same time each day. Predictability does more work than novelty.
- Log it on page 4 for one week. You will find a time of day that works, and it is rarely the one you assumed.

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Practical, honest company for people caring for someone with dementia.

Find the right column first

Ability changes through the day and through the illness. Check this each week, not once.

A — CAN FOLLOW A FEW STEPS	B — ONE STEP AT A TIME	C — MOSTLY SENSES AND TOUCH
Still holds a short goal in mind. Can be shown something once and carry on. May notice and mind their own mistakes.	Needs each step handed over as it comes. Loses the thread if left alone. Copies you well.	Words have thinned out. Responds to touch, rhythm, music, warmth, familiar smells. Attention comes in short windows.

The three tests for any activity

- **Can it fail?** If there is a right answer, there is a wrong one, and being wrong in front of someone you love is the fastest route to a refusal. Sorting is safe. Quizzing is not.
- **Does it need memory?** Anything requiring them to recall what happened five minutes ago will collapse. Anything drawing on old, deep, practiced motions will not.
- **Can it stop at any second?** An activity with no finish line can end when attention ends, with nothing left unfinished to argue about.

When they say no

WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING	WHAT TO DO INSTEAD
Too many steps — they can see they will fail	Move down one column. Start it yourself and hand it over mid-way.
It reads as a test	Ask for help rather than offering an activity. "I need a hand with these."
Wrong time of day	Check the log. Most people have one reliable window and it is often mid-morning.
Too much noise or too many people	One person, one table, television off. Competing sound is the most common silent cause.
Pain, needing the bathroom, hunger, tiredness	Rule these out first. A refusal is often a symptom wearing a costume.
It is childish and they know it	Drop it. Use real objects with a real purpose — laundry, tools, mail, plants.

Never correct a memory to win an activity. If sorting the photographs brings up a wrong name or a person long dead, go with it. The activity is the point; accuracy is not. Correcting ends the session and costs you the next one.

Fifty things to try

Pick from the column that matches today. Anything in a column to the left of theirs will frustrate; anything to the right is still fine to use.

A — CAN FOLLOW A FEW STEPS	B — ONE STEP AT A TIME	C — MOSTLY SENSES AND TOUCH
• Sorting photographs into named piles • Baking from a recipe you read aloud • Potting up seedlings • Sanding or oiling a piece of wood • Setting the table for a real meal • Watering and deadheading plants • Sorting screws, buttons or coins into a tray • Card games with the rules simplified • Writing birthday cards you address • Peeling and chopping soft vegetables • Looking through an old catalogue or atlas • Winding wool, sorting a sewing box • Washing and drying up together • Choosing tomorrow's clothes from two options • Singing along to a full album from their twenties • Walking a familiar route and naming what you pass • Polishing shoes or silver	• Folding towels and pillowcases • Matching and rolling socks • Wiping the table, one cloth, one surface • Stirring a bowl you hold steady • Sweeping one patch of floor • Shelling peas, snapping beans, husking corn • Sorting laundry into lights and darks • Putting cutlery into a drawer tray • Dusting with a soft cloth • Turning pages of a photograph album with you • Watering plants with a small can • Brushing a dog or a soft toy animal • Threading large beads onto a lace • Rolling and unrolling a ball of wool • Stacking and unstacking plastic containers • Putting stamps on envelopes • Turning a hand crank — egg beater, pencil sharpener	• Hand massage with unscented lotion • A warm, weighted lap blanket • Music from ages 15 to 25, played whole • A fidget blanket with ribbons, zips and buttons • Holding a warm mug in both hands • Smelling coffee, cinnamon, lemon, cut grass • Brushing their hair, slowly • A soft cloth to hold and worry at • Sitting outside in moving air • Watching birds at a feeder near the window • A fish tank or a slow window view • Rocking gently in a chair • Your voice reading anything at all, unhurried • Hymns or songs sung in your own voice • A textured cushion, sheepskin, or velvet • Holding hands without saying anything

Ten minutes and no plan

Three fallbacks that work at almost any stage and need nothing bought.

- **Put on the album, not the playlist.** Music from roughly ages 15 to 25 is laid down deepest. A whole album in order beats a shuffled mix, because the next track is already expected.
- **Hand over one real job.** Warm towels out of the dryer, cutlery to be sorted, mail to be opened. Real work with a real purpose is accepted where a puzzle is refused.
- **Sit down and do nothing, out loud.** Hands held, a window, your voice describing what you see. This counts, and it works on the days nothing else does.

What is usually a waste of money

- **Anything with instructions on the box,** and any game that is timed or scored. Failure is built into the design.
- **Generic themed craft kits.** Bought for a diagnosis rather than a person.

One week of trying things

Name _____ Week beginning _____

DAY	TIME OF DAY	WHAT WE TRIED	COLUMN A/B/C	MINUTES THEY STAYED	MOOD AFTER - = +	WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED
Mon						
Tue						
Wed						
Thu						
Fri						
Sat						
Sun						

Reading your own week

- **Look at the time-of-day column before anything else.** If four of the seven good sessions cluster in one window, you have found the most useful thing on this page. Move everything else out of that window.
- **Under five minutes twice running means the column is wrong,** not that the activity is wrong. Try the same idea one column down.
- **Keep anything that reached ten minutes.** Repetition is not boring to someone who does not remember doing it yesterday, and familiarity raises the odds it works again.
- **Mood after matters more than minutes.** A five-minute activity that ends calm beats a thirty-minute one that ends agitated.

Bring this to the appointment. “He won’t do anything” is hard for a clinician to act on. A week showing that engagement collapses every afternoon after 3 p.m. is a specific finding — it points at pain, fatigue, medication timing, or the late-day agitation that has its own name and its own management. Hand the sheet over.

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Education and peer support, not medical advice.