

Recreation and meaningful activity

Recreation activities encompass numerous types of activities, ranging from social interactions to physical exercise to arts and crafts. Recreation activities are typically engaged in during non-work or non-obligatory time and provide participants with an opportunity to become fully absorbed in a freely chosen activity.

Take a few minutes to think about your favorite recreation activities and respond to the following questions:

What are your favorite recreation activities?

Why do you engage in these activities?

People tell us that they engage in recreation activities for a variety of reasons. The benefits of participation can be categorized into two general areas: functional abilities and quality of life. Some people engage in recreation due to the enhancement of their *functional abilities*, such as strengthening one's physical abilities from sports or aerobics, the development of social friendships and family relationships from shared activities, and the release of tension or anxiety from engagement in a fully absorbing experience in which one does not think about obligatory activities in daily life. Another important benefit revolves around how recreation activities can enhance our overall *quality of life* - these recreational activities in day to day life can positively influence our life satisfaction and well-being. For example, many people engage in activities because they affirm their identities. An older adult may think of himself or herself as a gardener and,

therefore, experiences great pleasure when planting and weeding the garden and the mere act of gardening may reinforce his or her self-identity as a gardener. Recreation activities are a means of providing meaningful structure to the day to day lives of individuals with dementia. Activities can be planned that draw on the residual strengths of the individual and strengthen remaining functional abilities. Recreation activities also provide a vehicle for older adults to engage in meaningful recreation behaviors with family members and to enhance their quality of life.

During the progression of dementia, the individual will experience a variety of losses including the abilities to work, drive, care for him or herself, and the ability to interact socially outside of the home. Situations and responsibilities that the individual was once able to handle independently become difficult if not impossible for the individual. The individual will come to rely on others to meet his or her needs. This overall loss of independence is reflected in the individual's leisure lifestyle. The individual with dementia can experience great **constraints** and **barriers** to leisure activities.

Constraints and barriers prevent the individual from experiencing leisure in a way that is meaningful. The individual may be unable to recall what activities were once preferred, or what skills are necessary to engage in the activity. The individual may lack the initiative and motivation to engage in activities. However, these barriers and constraints do not mean that the individual does not desire to, or need to, participate in leisure activities. In fact, **participation in leisure activities can lead to a number of benefits for the individual with dementia**. Those benefits include:

- Sensory stimulation
- Physical activity (which can prevent muscle atrophy)
- Opportunities for socialization
- Positive affect (emotions)
- Improved quality of sleep
- Opportunities for self-expression
- Provides an opportunity for the individual to test him or herself
- Enhancement of self-esteem

When planning leisure activities for an individual with dementia there are a number of important things to keep in mind. First of all, the activities that are likely to be meaningful for the individual are ones that have been done in the past.

Learn what activities that the individual has enjoyed and build activity ideas from those activities. Second, due to the progressive nature of dementia it is important to consider what activities the individual still has the abilities to perform successfully. Chosen activities should be simple enough to match the skills of the individual. Methods for determining the skills of the individual, methods for assessing what skills are necessary to complete tasks, and how activities may be adapted to meet the special needs of individuals with dementia will be discussed next.

Information in the previous section was adapted from the Art of Dementia Care (Buettner, 1994).

C. Matching Activities to Participants' Skill Level (Materials from In-Home Recreation by Judith Voelkl)

In order to provide positive recreation experiences for older adults, it is useful to consider the match between the skill level of the individual and the challenges of the activity. Let's consider how our skill level and the challenges of an activity may affect how much we enjoy what we are doing. Do you have a hobby or activity in which you have invested a great deal of energy and time? If so, I would venture to guess that you are an expert in that activity, probably more skilled than the average person. For sake of example, let's say your preferred activity is tennis. Well, most likely you seek out opponents who are a pretty even match - who challenge your skill level. Take a few minutes to consider the following questions:

How enjoyable would a game be with an opponent who is a beginner?

How enjoyable would a game be with an opponent who is much more skilled?

How enjoyable would a game be when your skill level matches the skill level of your opponent (that's the level of challenge you will experience)?

When planning activities for and with the older adult with dementia, it is important for us to keep in mind his or her skill level. We want to engage the older adult in an activity that provides challenges matching his or her skill level. Therefore, it is important that we know the skill levels of the older adults with whom we work. The At-Home Recreation Program staff will provide you with preliminary

information on the older adult with whom you will work. It is also important that we understand the demands or challenges inherent in recreation activities.

D. Activity Analysis and Adaptation:

Identifying the Skills Needed to Participate in an Activity

Activity analysis is a method for examining the characteristics or demands and challenges of an activity. The information gleaned from activity analysis allows us to ultimately consider the demands or challenges of an activity in relation to the skill level of the older adult.

In activity analysis we consider the following demands of an activity*:

1. Physical Demands/Characteristics

- What parts of the body are required?
arms, hands, legs, feet, neck, head?
- What types of movement are required?
bending, stretching, standing, reaching, throwing, catching?
- What level of coordination is required? eye-hand coordination?
- What level of strength is required? endurance?
flexibility?

2. Cognitive Demands/Characteristics

- How much immediate recall is necessary?
- How much long term memory is necessary?
- What level of concentration is required? for how long?
- How many rules are there?
- Do participants need to be able to read? write? use math?
- Do participants need to be able to recognize color, objects, sizes, numbers?
- Is abstract thinking needed?

3. Emotional Demands/Characteristics

- What feelings, if any, may be expressed as part of this activity?
joy, guilt, pain, anger, fear, frustration?

4. Social Demands/Characteristics

- What type of social interaction is demanded?
dyad? small group? large group?

- Do participants interact directly with one another?

A simplified approach to analyzing activities is to keep the above questions in mind and rank the domains in terms of their demands (1=domain with most demands, 2=domains with second greatest demands, etc). Let's look at a few examples:

Bicycling	physical	<u>1</u>
	cognitive	<u>2</u>
	emotional	<u>3</u>
	social	<u>4</u>
Solitaire	physical	<u>3</u>
	cognitive	<u>1</u>
	emotional	<u>2</u>
	social	<u>4</u>

Now why don't you try this out with a few activities.

Jigsaw Puzzles	physical	_____
	cognitive	_____
	emotional	_____
	social	_____
Visiting with friends	physical	_____
	cognitive	_____
	emotional	_____
	social	_____
Gardening	physical	_____
	cognitive	_____
	emotional	_____
	social	_____
Walking for exercise	physical	_____
	cognitive	_____
	emotional	_____
	social	_____

You now have valuable information on the demands or challenges of the activity and are ready to think about whether the older adult could participate in the specific activity. What are the skills or functional abilities of the older adult? Does he or she possess the skills to participate in the activity?

While the individual with dementia is suffering from a progressive disorder that may limit his or her ability to participate in certain activities, that does not mean that those activities cannot be modified to *meet* the abilities of the individual. Often, activities can be simplified by breaking down activities into steps and eliminating or modifying steps that are too difficult. This process is called **activity adaptation**.

A simple example of how activities can be adapted is the game of Bingo. Almost everyone has played Bingo at some time in his or her life, and the rules are simple. However, to an individual with dementia the Bingo card can be complicated and formidable. There are a number of things that can be done to simplify Bingo to meet the abilities of individuals with dementia. First of all, homemade cards can be made so that the card has less numbers. Rather than being 5x5 the cards could be made 3x3 or 2x3. Second, rather than using a large variety of numbers, use only 1 to 20. Third, eliminating the free-space can also simplify the activity. One last way the activity could be modified is by making each game “black-out”; it may be easier for the individual with dementia to determine independently that he or she has won.

When adapting activities, however, it is important to keep the activity as close to the original or traditional activity as possible. Too much adaptation may change the activity to the point where it is not recognizable to the individual. Therefore, only make adaptations to those aspects of the activity that must be adapted. It is also important to individualize activity adaptations. One adaptation for one individual may not be a correct adaptation for another individual.

Also, rather than considering major adaptations of an activity, the key to successful participation may be in how **we structure activities**. **Breaking the tasks of the activity into steps** ensures that we maintain a flow of information and demands that can be understood and followed by the older adult with dementia.

For example, in conducting an activity such as baking, it may be best to provide the older adult with one instruction at a time. First have the older adult get one egg from the refrigerator. Then have the individual crack the egg in a bowl. Then ask

him or her beat the egg. Providing the older adult with one instruction at a time will help to eliminate possible sources of confusion.

* Adapted from: Peterson, C. A., & Gunn, S. L. (1984). Therapeutic recreation program design: Principles and procedures. Prentice Hall.

Recreation Action Plan for your resident

Resident's favorite shared recreation activities include the following:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

We plan to engage in:

Activity: _____

Times per week: _____

Location: _____

The plus side or benefits of engaging in the selected recreation activities includes the following:

We have learned that, at times, the barriers or problems related to participating in selected recreation activities include the following:

<u>barrier/problem</u>	<u>potential solutions</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____