

MAKING THE MOST OF MEMORIES: Creating Memory Books and Activity Kits



“It is a failure of our imagination when we don’t acknowledge that certain frail Elders have something to offer. This is our challenge...to create opportunities for all to give as well as receive.”
William H. Thomas, M.D., The Eden Alternative

Alzheimer’s Arkansas Programs and Services is pleased to offer “**Making the Most of Memories**”. It was developed because we believe that finding meaningful activities for persons diagnosed with dementia is crucial to their well-being. We also believe that these activities will alleviate stress for caregivers who are wondering, “What can I do?”

Alzheimer’s disease is a progressive disease of the brain characterized by a gradual loss of memory and other mental functions. Alzheimer’s disease not only affects the person diagnosed with the disease but also the caregivers and loved ones. It is important to remember that persons with dementia are, first and foremost, people. They have basic needs, which include the need to feel self worth, the need to express thoughts and feelings, the need to feel a sense of accomplishment, and the need to belong. Often, so called “behavior problems” can be traced to the inability to meet one or more of these basic needs.

A **Memory Book** can be a helpful tool to both the individual diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and the family. The purpose of the **Memory Book** is to provide a record of the individual’s personal history. This can be especially helpful as the disease progresses and memory loss increases. The goal of this manual is to provide ideas for activities that will be both interesting and stimulating to the person with dementia. In addition, the activities can be rewarding and fulfilling to caregiver.

The **Memory Book** tells about likes, dislikes, interests, work history and it identifies family and friends. It is recommended that this project be started as soon as possible after the diagnosis of Alzheimer’s as been made. Not only will this book help your loved one to remember their life story but can also serve as a storybook for future generations.

Getting Started on Your Memory Book – to build your memory book you will need:

- A three-ring binder
- Clear plastic sheet protectors
- Colored paper, such as construction paper
- Tape or glue, scissors, pens, markers
- Plain paper to write short notes about the photos or memorabilia
- Family pictures, tokens from past events, anything else that is helpful and meaningful to the individual

Topics to Include in Your Memory Book

- Family
- Key Life Events – give dates and describe events
- Places I’ve Lived – Describe the place (use photo and map)
- Personality – Things that make them happy
- Religious/Spiritual
- Favorite Foods or Recipes
- Holidays or Favorite Times of the Year
- Education
- Awards Received
- Clubs or Groups
- Work History

- Recreational and Hobbies
- Military History
- Politics
- Music, Movies, Theatre
- Reading
- Animals and Pets
- Travel – Places visited, maps and photos
- Transportation

Memory Boxes

Similar to the **Memory Book** is a **Memory Box**. A **Memory Box** can include anything that leads to reminiscing. It differs from the Book in that it is usually 3-D rather than just pictures and stories. The Box includes objects that can be handled and will bring back specific moments for your loved ones. To create **Memory Boxes**, use plastic storage containers, shoeboxes, jewelry boxes, tackle boxes, etc. – the container you use may depend upon the type of Memory Box you have decided to make. Below are some suggestions for types of Memory Boxes.

- **Personal** – this type of Memory Box is tied to the person it will represent.
- **Themed** – boxes can be created for everything from individual sports to holidays to hobbies.

Activity Kits

A variation of the **Memory Box** is a box or “kit” that encourages activities. Be as creative as you wish. These **Kits** are for you and your loved ones. Be aware that certain activities may be more or less appropriate for different stages of the disease progression. For example, in the earlier stages the person might find some of the activities too simple. While in the later stages, you might need to be careful with some pieces because the individual may put something in their mouth.

- **Matching and Sorting** – matching activities provide a way for an individual to create order in their world.
- **Clay for Molding and Mixing** – this activity exercises the muscles of the hand and helps to develop hand-eye coordination.
- **Knot Tying** – This kit is designed to improve strength and coordination. This activity may be helpful for those who have difficulty keeping their hands still.
- **Tool Kit** – This kit is great for encouraging reminiscing about former occupations or building something.
- **Cut Outs** – This kit could contain various colors of construction paper, foam or even stiff types of fabric. The idea is to cut shapes of all kinds.
- **Foam Quilt Patterns** – This kit challenges the individual to create colorful patterns from flat foam pieces.
- **Letters and Numbers** – This kit is more appropriate for individuals in earlier stages if you actually plan on spelling words. However, it can still be used late in the disease process by just talking about the shapes and colors.
- **Fold Clothes** – This activity give the person something to do, which often will decrease agitation or the desire to wander.
- **Puzzles** – This activity is good for eye-hand coordination. Completing the puzzle also can bring a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.
- **Sifting** – Search and Find – Sifting activities require a mixture of fine and gross motor skills. You can use a box filled with a large bag of un-popped popcorn, dry beans or rice. Place six items such as poker chips or small colored blocks in the box. The individual can search for the items using hands or a slotted spoon.
- **Scented Lotions** – This kit can serve several purposes. Composed of several kinds of lotion in a box, the kit serves as a remembrance of different smells. It also gives the person the opportunity to have a hand massage.

Activity Facts and Tips

Activities are the things that we do, including getting dressed, doing chores, and even paying bills. They can represent who we are and what we are about. For the person with Alzheimer's they can mean the difference between feeling loved and needed and unloved and unnecessary. When planning activities and daily tasks for the person with Alzheimer's, think about the following things:

The person with Alzheimer's

- What skills and abilities does the person have? Concentrate on skills that remain.
- What does the person enjoy doing?
- Does the person begin activities without direction?
- Does the person have physical problems?

Your approach

- Make the activities part of your daily routine.
- Focus on enjoyment, not achievement.
- Determine what time of day is best.
- Offer support and supervision.
- Be flexible and patient, and stress involvement.
- Help the person remain as independent as possible.
- Simplify instructions.
- Establish a familiar routine.

The environment

- Make activities safe.
- Change your surroundings to encourage activities.
- Minimize distractions that can frighten or confuse the person.

Structuring the day

When structuring your day consider the following activities:

Morning activities

- Wash up, brush teeth and get dressed.
- Prepare and eat breakfast
- Discuss the newspaper or reminisce about old photos.

Afternoon activities

- Prepare and eat lunch, read mail, and clear and wash dishes.
- Listen to music or do a crossword puzzle.
- Take a walk

Evening Activities

- Prepare and eat dinner.
- Play cards or watch a movie.
- Read a book or magazine.

- ❖ Do not try to teach new skills or re-train for old hobbies. Some long-term memory is better preserved than short-term memory. Try to build on well-learned and preserved abilities.
- ❖ Look for activities that last no longer than half an hour. The person's attention span is shorter than normal.
- ❖ Try activities that are familiar, simple, repetitive and do not require much decision-making. Examples include sweeping, vacuuming, folding towels, raking, picking up sticks, stringing beads, rolling coins, stuffing envelopes and shelling peas.
- ❖ Break tasks down into component steps if necessary. For example, "set the table" can be broken down into 'placemats', 'plates', 'napkins', 'silver', 'glasses'.
- ❖ Help get the person started by verbally guiding her or demonstrating the desired behavior.

- ❖ Try to keep activities on an adult level. Allow the person to continue doing as much as she can by herself. Household or yard work helps her remain as a contributing member of the household.
- ❖ Adjust your expectations to fit the remaining ability. The task may not be done as well as it would have if you had done it, but remember the importance of the person's self-esteem.
- ❖ Be patient and flexible. Allow for a little more time to do things. Look for ways to adapt tasks so they can participate.
- ❖ Watch for frustration. If the person becomes upset or agitated, step in to help or distract with another pleasurable activity, break or snack. Remember, outings and passive entertainment can be quite successful.

A frequent question from the Alzheimer's caregiver is, **“What am I supposed to do?”** Keeping the person with Alzheimer's disease busy is helpful to the entire family. Keeping hands busy and interest as high as possible helps the person with Alzheimer's feel that they are still a worthwhile contributor.

The following are some suggestions:

- Color in coloring books.
- Keep \$50 in coins. Keep coin wrappers. Sort coins and wrap. Empty wrappers and start over next time with new wrappers.
- Keep a bushel of washed clothes to be folded daily, or even more often, if helpful.
- Sort silverware
- Care for plants – indoor and outdoors, plant a garden
- Polish shoes
- Play with a pet
- Match and fold socks
- Write letters. It's okay if you can't read them.
- Listen to books on tape.
- A small-size rubber ball to squeeze provides good exercise for the hands.
- Help the person to collect things that interest them. They can keep it in a special place to rearrange, add to, or display.
- Give much love to your family member.
- While they can still talk, please listen.

Supporting Arkansas Families Since 1984

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Our services include:

- 24 hour telephone support
- Family and professional education
- Support groups for patients and caregivers
- Financial assistance
- Community awareness presentations
- Monthly newsletter and Lending Library

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