

# Activities for Dementia Patients

## Purposeful Activities for All Stages

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# Introduction

## **Why Do Dementia Patients Need Purposeful Activities?**

Caring for someone with dementia comes with many challenges, not the least of which is how to keep the person occupied on a daily basis. Whether you provide care in a professional, family or another setting, you likely face the ongoing challenge of coming up with activities that are both engaging and meaningful. You want the person or people you care for to feel they are still making contributions to the world and doing something that's worthwhile, despite their dementia diagnosis. You may also need activities that keep them occupied in order to give yourself time to get other important things done.

Dementia is a condition that involves an impairment of a person's mental abilities that is significant enough to disrupt their daily life. It's a collection of symptoms that affect a person's memory and potentially other faculties, such as reasoning and judgment. That can make it difficult to find activities that are satisfying, enriching and safe for a dementia patient.

Purposeful activities help improve the day-to-day experience of those with dementia and other memory care conditions. So, how do you know what activities offer purpose and meaning? We have 12 ideas that are inexpensive and easy to execute. They can help occupy a dementia patient for hours and make your experience as a caregiver more manageable and meaningful as well.





## Activity 1: Shoe Shine Box

When I came across an old shoe shine kit, it triggered a memory of how important shining shoes was in my father's life. Every Sunday morning before church, my dad would shine his shoes. It was a habit as routine as getting in the car to actually drive to church. Shining shoes is also a great activity for men or women with dementia.

## What you need

It may not be possible to find an old-fashioned shoe shine box like the one my father had, but today you can go to a dollar store and buy an inexpensive shoe shine kit. Those kits usually come with a brush, a little sponge, a chamois cloth for buffing and shoe shine polish.

Shoe shine polish is often black, which can be messy, and it's toxic, which could pose a danger if eaten. Find a product that is nontoxic. Companies now offer a polish that is clear and nontoxic – like a furniture polish – that would be great for this activity. You can also present the brushing and buffing portion of the activity without polish at all.

## The activity

Offer the dementia patient a pair of shoes, preferably their own, and allow them to buff and brush the leather. If your patient has lost some hand dexterity, give them a cloth instead of a brush, which can be easier to handle. For higher functioning patients, lacing shoes may still be an option. You can allow them to fully or partially lace the shoes, depending on their level of cognitive and motor function.



Shoe shining and lacing is an activity that is purposeful, meaningful and age-appropriate. It allows the dementia patient dignity, especially when in the company of other people, and the feeling that they still have something to offer themselves and others, just as they did in their younger years. It could engage them for a significant amount of time, and the end result is nice and shiny shoes.

[View the video demonstrating the shoe shine box activity here.](#)



## Activity 2: Pocketbook

A pocketbook can be very entertaining for dementia patients if you provide one that is filled with items that have significance to the person. Consider offering a pocketbook, bag or purse that is full but not overstuffed, because you want to keep things simple. Place things inside the bag that the patient can sort through, remove and look at.



### Objects to include

Choose items that will give the patient a sense of peace. Some objects that you might place inside a pocketbook are:

- Rosary beads
- Holy cards
- A hymnal
- A small picture or spiritual book
- Packages of tissues
- Keys
- A wallet
- An emery board
- Pictures of loved ones

Items that work well fit easily in a patient's hand. Select objects that are easy to use and that your patient or loved one would like. Think about what you or someone you know would put in their own purse.

Beware of including any items that might trigger negative feelings. If the person doesn't drive any longer, or if they're exit-seeking and still trying to drive, don't include keys, for example. But for many dementia patients, keys can be reassuring and comforting to handle. You might also avoid items that could make a mess, such as lipstick.

## **Make the pocketbook activity a tactile experience**

Another significant component is the feel or texture of the pocketbook. Remember that patients can enjoy feeling things. You can find bags that are soft, leather or cloth. Especially if the patient is a woman, a pocketbook may be a reminder of experiences that they had earlier in life, as a mother or a professional. My own mother loved putting things in and outside of her wallet or a little storage box.

Instead of a pocketbook, you can also substitute something similar that is easy to open, close and handle. Use the variation that works for you.

Pocketbooks can be very positive in that they provide an entertaining activity for the dementia patient, who will enjoy taking the items out and putting them back inside.

On the other hand, be aware that a pocketbook can be a signal to the patient that they're going somewhere or that the caregiver is leaving. If a patient observes you putting a pocketbook over your shoulder, it could make them want to follow you and leave. Avoid putting the pocketbook over your shoulder when you're preparing to leave and store it out of sight of the patient.

[View the video demonstrating the pocketbook activity here.](#)

## Activity 3: Silverware



Another simple activity for dementia patients is handling silverware. Sets of forks, knives and spoons are used multiple times a day in homes and memory care settings alike, and utensils go in and out of a drawer, the dishwasher or the sink.

A wonderful activity that can make a dementia patient feel that they are meaningfully participating in daily life starts with a regular tray of silverware. You can either remove all of the silverware or leave one utensil in each section of the tray. The fewer items there are in the silverware tray to start, the easier it will be for the person to be able to sort and put things back. You can determine where your patient feels comfortable by first removing all of the pieces, and then seeing if they do better if you leave some pieces in the tray. Once you find out the person's level of comfort, you can let them try to refill the tray.

It doesn't matter if they put a spoon with a fork or a knife, or if they move things around and put them in different orders. It does not have to be perfect. We're not seeking perfection, we're just looking for a meaningful activity. Once the person has finished and has put everything back into the tray, you can remove the utensils and ask them to help you again. Or you can put the items in the dishwasher. If the person is high-functioning enough, you can have them set the table for you.

Just be aware of good hygiene, and wash items as needed after this activity.

[View the video demonstrating the silverware activity here.](#)



## Activity 4: PVC Pipe Fittings

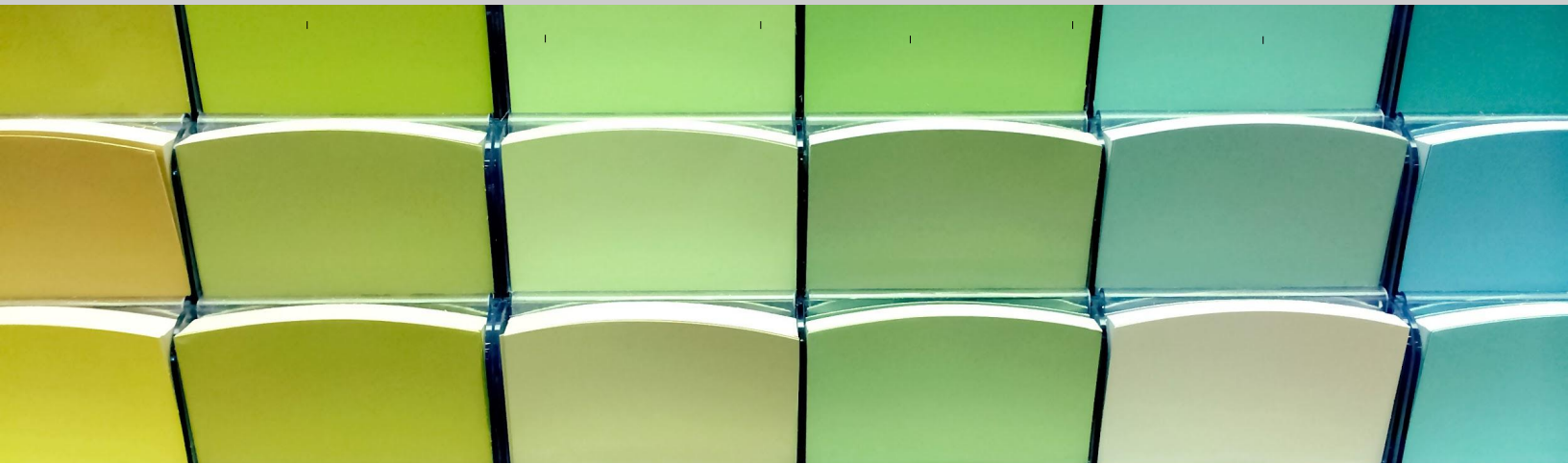
We all love toys, even adults. Another activity you can offer to occupy dementia patients involves what I consider adult toys. If you go to a big box home improvement store, you can purchase pieces of PVC piping for as little as 25 cents. Look for piping that screws together.

Allow the person you care for to put the pipe fittings together and take them apart like puzzle pieces. Even if they can't put them together, they can take them out of the storage bag or container and put them back inside. This is an activity that can keep someone occupied for a period of time then be neatly put away.

Imagine you're trying to cook dinner, repair something or help a child with homework. Or maybe you work in a facility and need to focus your attention on caring for another resident. These PVC pipe fittings provide an inexpensive, enjoyable way to occupy a person's time and attention.



[View the video demonstrating the PVC pipe fitting activity here.](#)



## Activity 5: Paint Swatches

Another activity inspired by a trip to the home improvement store involves paint swatches. Obviously, these cards come in many colors, but their textures vary as well. Feeling different textures – from slick, high gloss to coarse – can be satisfying for a dementia patient. You can also use these swatches in a variety of other ways.

You can create something like a puzzle for matching colors. For example, get three or four of the same swatches and have the person match them by color or by size. You can also ask them to help you determine which color to paint a wall. That option could require more involvement in the activity on your part, but perhaps not. Be creative! When collecting paint swatches, you can also let the employees at the store know what you're doing, and they're likely to be very helpful.

An important part of working with senior citizens is coming up with activities that are age appropriate. Ideally, you want to find alternatives for activities using puzzles their grandchildren might be playing with, for example. That's why paint swatches are a great option to offer as part of an activity.

[View the video demonstrating the paint swatches activity here.](#)

## Activity 6: Feather Dusters

In addition to caring for someone with dementia, you probably always have other daily tasks to complete as well. Those tasks can include household chores like vacuuming and cleaning. Often with housecleaning, the person we care for wants to be involved and helping. Unfortunately, though, sometimes that means they get in the way instead of being helpful.

For a low cost, you can purchase an old-fashioned feather duster from a big box or dollar store. The great thing about dusting is that cleaning is a normal part of everyday life in many households and it does more than just entertain or occupy someone.

Enlisting a dementia patient to help with cleaning using a feather duster provides a meaningful activity that also helps with a person's range of motion. Dusting can help loosen a person's joints as they reach, twist and turn. This activity provides a bit of exercise along with a feeling that they're providing you valuable assistance.

[View the video demonstrating the feather duster activity here.](#)





## Activity 7: Coupons



Coupon clipping is an activity that will be meaningful to many – either they have done it in the past or remember their folks having done so when they were a child. Save the free coupons you receive in the mail and purchase an inexpensive pair of safety scissors. If the dementia patient you care for has the ability to cut – using safety scissors – they might even clip a coupon that’s useful for you.

Just remember: Someone may be able to cut, but they might not cut along the borders of the coupon correctly. They might cut right across the coupon. It doesn't matter – that is not what is important.

Coupon clipping gives a dementia patient a purpose through an adult activity instead of one that’s suitable for children, like cutting out paper dolls or coloring with crayons. There’s nothing wrong with those activities, but it’s ideal to give dementia patients the feeling that what they're doing is helping you. At the same time, it's keeping them occupied so that you can do something else. Of course if you have time, you can sit down and engage with them over the coupons.

[View the video demonstrating the coupons activity here.](#)

## Activity 8: Stuffed Animals That 'Breathe'



Almost everyone loves animals. For about \$20 to \$40 online, you can order a plush cat or dog that appears to breathe or snore. These stuffed animals are powered by batteries, and you can watch and feel the subtle up-and-down motion of their “breath.” Some arrive in a box with a little soft bed, and others also come with a brush.

Whenever you’re caring for people who have dementia, especially in the later stages of the disorder, texture and feel is important. Letting them hold a plush puppy or kitty in their laps gives them something soft and soothing to stroke or brush. It’s another activity that makes them feel involved and like they have a purpose. They feel as if they’re soothing and comforting the animal and, at the same time, it’s providing a similar effect for them!

Obviously, with this activity, the animal cannot be hurt. However, if the person with dementia expresses any concern about dropping or hurting the animal, then you can just gently move it out of their lap and place it beside them. They can stroke the animal in that position.

These stuffed creatures make a great gift. Many people with dementia want to keep their pets when they move to a facility. Sometimes those wishes can be accommodated, and other times not. There also can come a time when a person has to give up a pet because they cannot handle the responsibilities, and the pet may not be safe. So this makes a great activity for someone who has enjoyed having pets in the past, or anyone who might like the feeling of connecting with an animal.

[View the video demonstrating the breathing pets activity here.](#)

## Activity 9: Jewelry Box

Another affordable and easy activity involves a jewelry box. This activity is appropriate for men and women, though it may feel more natural to present it to women. You can purchase a jewelry box and jewelry at a flea market or garage sale for not much money if you don't already have these items around the house.

Fill each compartment with a few pieces of jewelry and similar items, such as bracelets, rosary beads and the like. Allow the person or people you care for to go through the items and help them try on the pieces of jewelry if they express an interest. Simplify the items, depending on what the person can handle. Even if the pieces are of modest value, they will give you and the person something to talk about and may trigger reminiscences. Reminiscence therapy, which involves talking about past events or experiences with tangible prompts, can be very beneficial for dementia patients.

Let the person you are caring for bring out each of the items, talk about them or try them on, and then eventually return them to the box. This simple activity is age appropriate, keeping the person engaged while maintaining a sense of dignity.

[View the video demonstrating the jewelry box activity here.](#)







## Activity 10: Dolls

You always want to offer people with dementia activities that are age appropriate, and interacting with dolls may initially seem like it doesn't meet that criteria. However, sometimes as people grow older, their memories reach back in time, including a time when they may have had babies themselves.

Those who are experiencing anxiety with their dementia often relax when you give them a baby doll that they can hold, rock, cuddle and swaddle in a soft, warm blanket. This can be a meaningful activity that gives someone a feeling of purpose, in addition to calming feelings of anxiety. It may remind them of their own children or grandchildren.

Even if you are on a budget, you can find simple and affordable dolls at your local drugstore that are soft and easy to hold. You don't have to settle for a hard or rigid doll. Also, the cover that you put around the doll may be as meaningful as the doll itself – offering items with a pleasing texture is so important when caring for dementia patients. If at any point during the activity they begin to get agitated or want to get rid of the doll or throw the doll, just gently take it away.



### **Additional baby carriage activity**

Sometimes people will want to push the baby in a carriage. Unfortunately, most real or toy carriages will not be stable enough, and you should discourage the use of those. However, some walkers or rollators have baskets that make for great simulated baby carriages. You can fit the baby and its blanket inside the basket and allow the person to walk the doll that way. It's a win-win situation because the person is also getting exercise, which helps with mobility. Some people may become so attached to a doll that they wish to keep it with them at all times. This activity is a wonderful tool for anxiety.

[View the video demonstrating the dolls activity here.](#)



## Activity 11: Kitchen Storage Containers

These days, you can buy kitchen storage containers with lids in all different sizes for very little money. These work something like blocks in that someone can stack them and match the lids to the containers. However, unlike the blocks you might give a child, kitchen storage containers are age appropriate. Depending on a person's level of function, they may just be able to hold the pieces and take them in and out of a box. Regardless of the stage of dementia, so many activities can be created using these simple pieces.

Another affordable purchase is a set of measuring cups, which also can be fit inside one another and stacked. Measuring spoons provide a similar function. Handling these items will spur thoughts and conversations about cooking and planning meals, which can be engaging. It also offers the person with dementia the feeling that they're helping someone by organizing everyday kitchen items.

[View the video demonstrating the storage containers activity here.](#)



## Activity 12: Toolbox



This final idea works much like the pocketbook and jewelry box activities. A toolbox is another inexpensive container to purchase and fill with interesting items for a meaningful and engaging activity. This activity is not gender specific but may especially appeal to men.

A toolbox has a handle, so someone can carry it around with them, giving them a sense of purpose. Opening and closing boxes is interesting for people at any age – it offers that element of surprise. Obviously, you want to be very careful to put items in the toolbox that will be safe for the individual. That means having an understanding of the person’s level of dementia and how they behave. Don’t put a hammer in a toolbox with somebody that could hurt someone else or themselves with it.

Choose items that the person can safely handle and might evoke reminiscences. Some things you can put in the toolbox include: PVC piping, pieces of locks, soft paintbrushes, a lightweight tape measure. A level is another item that holds great intrigue. The person may not remember how to use it, but they often enjoy looking at the bubble inside. It’s an item you can demonstrate and talk about. Keys are another great item to include, unless they will trigger someone into wanting to get in a car and drive. Anything that someone can safely take out, look at, sort and put away works for this simple toolbox activity.

[View the video demonstrating the toolbox activity here.](#)

## Conclusion

Even with a dementia diagnosis, people still want to feel they are involved with their household or community. That's what most people want, regardless of age. It's a wonderful gift to be able to give someone a meaningful activity to do. When you're caring for someone with dementia, it can be hard to come up with ideas on your own to keep that person active and feeling that their life still has purpose. Hopefully these simple, inexpensive suggestions prove helpful in your caregiving. Some dementia patients may only enjoy some of these activities, while others may find hours of meaningful engagement with all of them, time and again. Find what works best for you.

## Additional Resources

[Watch free caregiver training videos on dementia activities by clicking here.](#)

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mmLearn.org offers real-life, quality caregiver training to anyone seeking practical ways to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of older adults in their care. Whether you're a healthcare professional, a family caregiver, or seeking guidance as a pastoral or spiritual caregiver – we know that you'll find mmLearn.org an essential learning tool in caring for older adults.

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