

Dementia Caregiving & Coronavirus: 9 cognitively stimulating activities you can do at home

Older adults are currently being advised to stay at home as much as possible, to lower their risk of COVID-19 (coronavirus). However – we know that is easier said than done.

If you are caring for someone living with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia, the recommended "social distancing" may cause further challenges and feelings of isolation. To help, we've put together a guide of cognitively stimulating in-person and virtual activities that you can do with your person from the safety of home.

Before you start planning, however, it is important to understand these are not one-size-fits-all. In order to pick the right activities for your person, consider their level of cognitive decline, what skills and abilities are remaining, and what cues or environmental aids can help the person. They may not be able to complete some tasks as well as they used to or even have the same tastes or preferences but stay ready for unexpected opportunities for fun and connection because you never know what will spark their interest.

For someone who is nonverbal, think about ways to talk through the activities described below by using visual and physical cues to connect them to what you're saying and doing. Consider activities that don't require a lot of set-up time and that provide immediate feedback. Try to do things together as much as possible – just setting the person down in front of a craft, for example, is not likely to be successful.

Additionally, if you aren't able to connect with your person physically but are able to reach out through video chat software such as Zoom or Google Hangouts, simply modify the suggested in-person activities to work remotely by sharing your screen with them. Finally, while your person may not remember the moments you are creating – you will! So be kind to yourself and choose things to do that are enjoyable for you both.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Reminisce: Look at old photographs, books, and magazines together. It is a great way to engage, and it can give your person an opportunity to tell stories about times gone by.

2. Engage the 5 senses:

- **Sight:** There are so many possibilities. Watch a favorite movie, read books, magazines, a short poem, or explore interesting websites on the computer or tablet. Other options include sitting together and observing what's happening

outside the window, going for drive, and drawing doodles or using coloring books.

- Sound: Play music and videos or sing together. Dance if you both can as a way to stay active!
- Touch: Have them feel fabrics and familiar objects or have them help you in a meaningful activity like folding warm laundry.
- Taste: Set up a small buffet of chocolate, fruit, or some of their other favorite foods.
- Smell: Have your person smell fresh herbs such as lavender or mint, or even take a moment to enjoy the smells before you dive into your mini-buffet.

3. “Compare and contrast”: One way to do this is to create a fun game around spotting the difference between two images. Something as simple as pulling up a photo of a dog vs. a photo of a cat and have them point out what is the same or different. Another stimulating activity around this idea is to talk about something current (for instance, a TV show or a new model car) and talk through how it has changed over time, and how it might be in the future.

4. Reflect: Start conversations that get the person living with dementia talking and thinking about past accomplishments, achievements, or contributions. This can be sparked by touching an award or other physical prompts around the house.

5. Plan together: Ask for your person’s help with creating a shopping list, gathering supplies, or organizing an upcoming event together. For example: “I think I’ll make some chocolate chip cookies tomorrow. Can you help me make a list of what we’ll need?”

6. Purposeful activity: Find things to do that have a clear purpose, like sweeping, cleaning out a drawer, organizing photos, or weeding the garden. These types of work activities create meaning for the person living with the disease. They show ourselves and others that we are competent and valued members of the family and community, and it can help your person develop a strong feeling of belonging.

7. Laugh: In times like these, laughter can be so valuable. Find ways to do it, whether it’s by watching a funny movie or TV show, reading joke books, or watching YouTube videos.

8. Connect with loved ones: Make phone or video calls to friends and loved ones. Take the time to write them a note or card. Chances are, they’re bored at home, too, and will welcome the connection!

9. Virtual experiences:

Visit museums from around the world from the comfort of your own home by taking a virtual tour.

- a) Google’s Arts and Culture team collaborated with 12 famous museums including the Musee d’Orsay to offer this unique experience (<https://www.travelandleisure.com/attractions/museums-galleries/museums-with-virtual-tours>).

- b) You can also explore other places like the famous Vatican museum (<http://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/tour-virtuali-elenco.html>) or the U.S.S. Midway Museum (<https://www.midway.org/360-virtual-tour/>).
- c) Grow a garden through San Diego Master Gardener (<https://www.mastergardenersd.org/lets-grow-together-san-diego/>). They have put together various virtual gardening activities including four specifically for reminiscence gardening.
- d) Go on “vacation” together...look up places you both want to see or places they might remember. You can even organize a “staycation” and look up local places you both love.
- For a more unique experience, you can even check out Google Earth (<https://www.google.com/earth/>).
 - Visit National Parks through National Geographic Virtual Tours (<https://www.travelzoo.com/blog/the-best-national-parks-to-visit-virtually/>)
 - The New York Botanical Garden’s Orchid Show (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCXkVDt7m1l&feature=youtu.be&t=10>)
 - Browse other live cam options on Explore.com with everything from kitten rescues to Santa Monica sunsets (<https://explore.org/livecams>).
- e) Observe and discuss animals such as sharks and penguins on live cams from the San Diego Zoo (<https://zoo.sandiegozoo.org/live-cams>) and Monterey Bay Aquarium (<https://www.montereybayaquarium.org/animals/live-cams>)!
- f) To virtually watch movies together, try using Netflix Party (<https://www.netflixparty.com/>).
- g) Get them moving with Youtube workouts such as yoga or stretching. Our Movement & Motion class instructor Dani even put together this video of easy at home moves (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4aYzwrN3oE&feature=youtu.be>)!
- h) Take advantage of the Well Connected program for seniors where you can converse with others who share your interests on topics such as poetry, birds, and gardening (<https://covia.org/services/well-connected/>). They host scheduled activities, support groups, and friendly conversation all completely free through the phone.
- i) “Attend” an online class together (art, meditation, etc.). Here are some appropriate meditations to try: Finding Calm in the Storm (<https://soundcloud.com/ucsdmindfulness/finding-calm-in-the-storm-with-marta-patterson?in=ucsdmindfulness/sets/short-meditation-sessions>) or Steadying the Heart with the Breath (<https://soundcloud.com/ucsdmindfulness/steadying-the-heart-with-the-breath-with-megan-prager?in=ucsdmindfulness/sets/short-meditation-sessions>).