Keeping active and involved

After a diagnosis of dementia, it’s important to keep enjoying the things you did before. You’re still the same person, and you can still do what you enjoy – you just might have to do it a little bit differently.

It can be hard to adjust to your diagnosis. You might be uncertain about the future, or you might have lost some of your confidence. You might not feel like you want to go out or stay involved in the way that you usually do, but it’s important to do so when you feel ready.

Staying active and involved can help you to keep your skills and abilities for longer. Seeing people and staying in touch can also help with your wellbeing. Above all, try to stay active and positive about the future.

‘Singing is great because you feel so much better if you do it, even if you don’t feel like it.’

Person living with dementia
Living with dementia: Keeping active and involved

Why stay active?

Activities can help you stay independent and provide a great sense of enjoyment. They can also keep you in touch with other people and improve your quality of life.

One of the most important ways of keeping involved and active is simply to talk to others, and not allow yourself to become isolated. Keeping in touch with other people can make you feel better now, and when you need more help in the future.

Staying active can also help by:

■ raising your self-esteem, helping you to feel less anxious or depressed

■ helping you to maintain your skills for longer

■ giving you a chance to express your feelings

■ giving you a chance to share your experiences with other people who can offer support.
Living with dementia doesn’t mean you have to stop doing what you do now. You may find that you need to make small changes to make it easier, safer or more comfortable for you, but you can keep doing the things you enjoy – and even take up new activities.

One step at a time

Try breaking tasks down into smaller parts. For example, even something that seems simple, like cooking, can be quite a complex process. Making a meal can include planning, cutting and chopping, mixing, using the cooker and timing. Think about each stage, one at a time. Can somebody help you with some of the steps? Can you make other steps simpler – for example, by using frozen vegetables rather than fresh ones?

Keep things simple

Keep things as simple as you need to and don’t push yourself too hard. Simplifying your routine or daily tasks will make things easier to manage. Take things at your own pace and don’t worry if some things seem difficult. Some days will be better than others – just as they are for everyone else.
Pick a good time and give yourself more time

You will enjoy something more if you can do it when you feel well. Try to think about what time of day you’re at your best and arrange things for then. Stop if you feel tired or ill. Give yourself longer if you need to, rather than feeling rushed.

Don’t be too hard on yourself

You may find that you can’t do things as well as you did before, or that they take much longer. It may be that you need some support to do some things. It is hard to adjust to this, but the important thing is to keep doing something even if it’s with a little help, for as long as you enjoy doing it.

Reduce distractions

It may be easier to focus and enjoy an activity if you can give it your full attention. Try to reduce clutter and background noise or go somewhere quieter if it helps you concentrate.
Eyesight and hearing

It is essential to look after your eyesight and hearing so that you can continue enjoying your chosen activities. If you wear glasses, make sure they are the correct kind and that they are clean. If you wear a hearing aid, make sure that it is working properly. Be sure to attend regular check-ups.

For more about this see factsheet 527, Sight, perception and hallucinations in dementia.

Speak to a professional

If you are finding some things particularly difficult, for example getting dressed, cooking, moving or getting around, then you may want to speak with a professional. An occupational therapist can assess any difficulties you have and recommend ways to stay independent for longer. They can also advise on assistive technology or equipment that can make it possible to live well with dementia. The Royal College of Occupational Therapists can help you find one in your area – see page 19 for details.

For more about this see factsheet 429, Using equipment and making adaptations to the home, or 437, Using technology to help with everyday life.
There are many activities that you can get involved in, some of which you may not have tried before.

**Cooking and household activities**

Cooking is something many of us do every day. You can continue – or start – doing this as long as it is safe for you. However, if it becomes too difficult, there are some small changes you can make. You could ask someone to help you in the kitchen, try an easier recipe, or use prepared sauces rather than making your own.

Other everyday household tasks like washing the dishes, folding clothes or dusting are also good ways of keeping active at home. Ask someone to do the task with you if it makes what you’re doing more enjoyable.

**Puzzles and games**

Any kind of pastime that keeps your mind active is good for you. It can also be a great way of spending time with other people. You could try doing a crossword puzzle, playing a board game or even an electronic game. If you start finding these difficult, consider other options. A number of companies and organisations make products specifically for people with dementia, such as jigsaws with larger pieces.
Entertainment technology

Touchscreen technology – including tablet computers or even mobile phones – has many advantages that can help you stay involved. They can be easier to use than desktop computers. You can also use touchscreen technology to interact with people around you. For example, on YouTube you can watch old videos or films from your past together, or listen to your favourite music.

Music and singing can be very powerful ways to relive memories, and music is also used as a form of therapy. Music therapy is enjoyable and it can also help your mental wellbeing. For more information on finding a qualified music therapist in your area see page 19 for details of the British Association for Music Therapy.

‘I made a homemade lasagne for tea – with a bit of prompting from my partner. I know it’s not a big deal for most but it is for me.’

Person living with dementia
Other technologies like Skype – a live video service that allows you to communicate face-to-face over the internet – make it easier to keep in touch with family and friends who live far away. You can also try online games. They can be a good source of entertainment as well as a way to keep your mind active.

For more details see Alzheimer’s Society factsheet 437, Using technology to help with everyday life.

If you like to read but dementia is making this difficult, you can try switching to audio versions of books, newspapers and magazines. These will allow you to enjoy your favourite publications in a different way.

‘My father lives with me and he can Skype my sister. The extra visual dimension adds a lot for him.’

Daughter of a person living with dementia
Activities out in the community

There are lots of opportunities out in the community to do different activities and meet people at the same time. This could be at a place of worship, an art gallery, museum, concert hall or theatre. Or it could be a community group, leisure centre or at the local pub.

Lots of places are becoming ‘dementia friendly’. This means that their staff and volunteers will be more understanding and have some knowledge about what it is like to live with dementia.

Arts and culture

Many heritage sites and arts and cultural venues are also becoming more dementia friendly. This means that the venue should be more welcoming to people with dementia. This should make your visit easier and more enjoyable. Being dementia friendly could be something simple, like having clearer signs in the venue. It might also mean that staff and volunteers have had dementia awareness training and so understand a little better what it’s like to live with dementia.

Some community venues organise events or activities that have been developed for and with people living with dementia. These include relaxed theatre performances or film screenings, special access and exhibitions or tours.

For more information visit alzheimers.org.uk
A lot of places also now run activity groups that bring people with dementia together. The more popular groups often involve singing, making music or painting. Other activities include drama, dance, reading, writing or poetry.

It’s important to find something that has meaning for you and that you enjoy. Not everyone will want to get involved in a group activity. But for those who do, a group can create a sense of togetherness and belonging, helping you keep active and involved.

You might find ideas for activities through some of the organisations listed in ‘Other useful organisations’ on pages 18 and 19. To find out what is happening in your area, ask at your local Alzheimer’s Society, library or community centre. Your local Alzheimer’s Society will also be able to tell you about day centres where you might be able to go to socialise or for activities.

‘My husband really enjoys going out to live music events. We recently saw a couple of tribute bands and had a great time.’

Wife of a person living with dementia
Exercise

Taking any form of exercise is good for your physical as well as emotional wellbeing. You may find it easier, safer or more fun to take part in physical activities with other people rather than alone. This could be through walking, swimming, dancing or gentle exercise classes (such as tai chi or yoga).

Ask at your local leisure centre about sessions or classes that might be suitable for you. Many centres organise specific sessions for older people or those with dementia.

Other forms of exercise, such as gardening, chair aerobics or gentle stretching, can also be done in and around the home.

For more information see Alzheimer’s Society factsheet 529, Exercise and physical activity.

If you’ve not exercised much before and are thinking of starting, it’s a good idea to talk to your GP or community nurse first. They can suggest ways for you to build up gradually and safely.

‘We have a tandem I bought as we’re both members of a local cycling club... it now means my wife can get out and ride along with them.’

Husband of a person living with dementia
Travel

Travelling and going on holiday can be a good way to relax and have fun. You may find it easier to go to familiar places. When considering where to go, think carefully about the practicalities. Long-distance travel can be particularly tiring.

As with many things, travelling is easier if you have someone with you. However, it’s not impossible if you do want to travel alone. Make sure you take the time to prepare, make lists of things to pack, and write down details of your travel arrangements and any documents you need.

For more information about travelling, see Alzheimer’s Society factsheet 474, Travelling and going on holiday.

Feeling well

Try to enjoy being in the moment and don’t worry about what might lie in store. Whatever activity you choose, the most important thing is that it means something to you and helps you to feel good.
Other useful organisations

**Arts 4 Dementia**
020 7239 4954
info@arts4dementia.org.uk
www.arts4dementia.org.uk

A charity that works with arts organisations to facilitate workshops on subjects such as art, drama, dance and music.

**ASA Dementia Friendly Swimming Hub**
dementiafriendly@swimming.org
www.swimming.org/dementiafriendly

A project run by the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) to create a network of dementia-friendly swimming pools across England, by improving facilities and removing barriers for people with dementia and their carers.

**British Association for Music Therapy**
020 7837 6100
info@bamt.org
www.bamt.org

The professional body for music therapy in the UK providing information and details of local therapists.
Creative Dementia Arts Network
07801 509993
info@creativedementia.org
www.creativedementia.org

A network that promotes the health and wellbeing of people with dementia through creative arts.

Dementia Adventure
01245 237548
info@dementiaadventure.co.uk
www.dementiaadventure.co.uk

Specialises in designing and delivering small group short breaks and holidays for people living with dementia, their partners, family, friends or carer to enjoy together.

Royal College of Occupational Therapists
020 7357 6480
hello@rcot.co.uk
www.rcot.co.uk

Provides details of independent occupational therapists in your area.
This publication has been reviewed by people affected by dementia and health and social care professionals.

To give feedback on this publication, or for a list of sources, contact publications@alzheimers.org.uk

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Alzheimer’s Society is the UK’s leading dementia charity. We provide information and support, improve care, fund research, and create lasting change for people affected by dementia.

If you have any concerns about Alzheimer’s disease or any other form of dementia, visit alzheimers.org.uk or call the Alzheimer’s Society Dementia Helpline on 0300 222 1122. (Interpreters are available in any language. Calls may be recorded or monitored for training and evaluation purposes.)