

THE PRESENT OF PRESENCE

Actionable Activities to Bring Joy to the Lives of Your Family, Caree, and Self

FOR YOURSELF

Coffee Talk: Meet a friend for a coffee for 30-60 minutes to connect, vent and gain a refreshed perspective.

Listen Up! Add a level of enrichment to your day. Find a podcast you enjoy and challenge yourself to listen to all the episodes. Listen in the car, in the shower, while cooking.

Take 5: When you have coffee, force yourself to do nothing other than drink that cup of coffee. No cell phone checking, list making or multi-tasking allowed.

Hit the Gym: Or, take a walk around the block. Having a dog is great for this. Get your blood flowing, soak up some vitamin D and gain a new state of mind.

Plan It: Commit monthly to getting together with friends. Anticipating events is as fulfilling to us than attending the actual event.

Use Your Stress Habits for Good Not Evil: Stress shopping? Why not shop for a cause and finally get your bedroom spruced up or better yet, find local charities in need of donations and make a point to shop for them. Stress eating? Try swapping the potato chips for homemade kale chips.

Get By With A Little Help From Your Friends: Friends in your new support group that is! Join a local support group and find others who understand what you are experiencing.

Couch Dates: Caregiving can be exhausting. Make a weekly couch date to put your feet up with your partner or children and watch a movie. Don't forget the popcorn and root beer floats!

CONNECTING WITH YOUR AGING PARENT OR LOVED ONE

When things like mobility, vision, and hearing are on the decline with older parents or loved ones, sometimes the activities you once enjoyed together need to be redesigned.

WAYS TO CONNECT DURING VISITS

Brag a Bit: Before your visit, upload recent photos from your phone onto your larger screened tablet or laptop. Bring the tablet along and show your loved one what you've been up to since your last visit. You can also share old family photos or images of far away destinations.

Count the Smiles: How many times can you get your caree to smile during the day? You could make it a game by trying to up the number each day or challenge family members in the house to see who can make your caree happiest.

Leave the Phone Alone: Keep your smartphone in your pocket. Make the most of your time together by being together and focus on the conversation. Show them how important they are to you by not looking for something "more important" on your phone.

Fun and Games: Find a particular project or activity that the two of you can do together. This activity could be working on a simple handyman's project, sipping tea, playing a simple board game, or completing a puzzle.

Roll the Dice: Get oversized foam dice and play dice games or make them up.

Find a Friend: If your caree lives in an assisted living, invite other residents to activities that may open the door to new friendships that are shared even when you are not there. All it takes is a "Hello."

WAYS TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO CONNECT WITH A LOVED ONE

As much as you and your caree love one another, they will still enjoy seeing new faces from time to time. Not only does this give you a break, but it also allows others to have a chance to make memories with your caree.

Take Them Up On It: So when you hear the phrase, “Let me know if I can do anything!” from family and friends that is your cue to make them an offer they hopefully won’t refuse. Make a habit to look for times in each upcoming month when you can ask someone to pop in for a visit or to provide a ride somewhere.

Bright Ideas: Have a few suggestions ready to offer to concerned family and friends. Often, they are well intentioned but unsure of what they could do for your caree. Providing them with some choices is a great way for them to self-select what they are comfortable doing.

The “Swap and Run”: Practice doing the “swap and run,” a technique perfect when you are with a large group of people at a party or family event. When you are with your caree, and someone comes over and begins chatting away, take the moment to step out into the rest of the room by saying, “Oh, Sally, Dad would love to hear all about your trip to Antarctica! Would you mind if I grab some food and say hello to Beth over there? I’ll be right back.” And just like that, you can circulate the party for a bit, and your caree doesn’t feel like you are babysitting them any longer.

Make a Date: Set up a shared Google calendar and invite family and friends to schedule time to visit. You can send out bi-weekly or monthly email reminders to your support network asking them to pick a day to stop by for a visit with your caree. The shared calendar will enable visitors to spread out their visits and allow you to see when Dad can expect his cousin Ann to knock on his door. Nothing can be more frustrating when a visitor arrives as you are about to head out to a doctor’s appointment. Avoid this with an online scheduling plan.

WAYS TO CAPTURE THE STORIES OF A LOVED ONE

Ever think to yourself, “I wish I could hear my grandmother sing that song again”? Document the stories of your caree for yourself and future generations. With a smartphone, the tools are right at your fingertips.

Enlist the Younger Generation: Have the grandkids, nieces and nephews come and interview your caree. They can be as formal or as fun as they would like. No fancy equipment is needed. If you have a smartphone, you can record audio and videos.

3, 2, 1 Action!: Interview and record stories to create a living time capsule. Prepare questions and bring along memorabilia or photos to spark the stories.

Get Social: Consider involving the entire family, no matter how far away everyone may be living. Start a private Facebook group for your extended tribe. Use this space to keep connected by posting photos and even personal video messages. Even if your caree isn't able to participate online, you will have a consolidated place from which to spread the news and photos of what everyone is doing. You can bring your tablet when visiting and share all the new news with them.

Photo Time: Go through old family photos and get the stories behind the pictures. Photos are a great way to spark memories and learn untold tales.

The Question of the Day: A lifetime of stories lives inside each of us. Set a goal of gathering a story each time you spend time with your caree. This can also be done long distance with a phone call, be it daily or weekly.

CREATING MEANINGFUL MEMORIES BETWEEN AN OLDER ADULT AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Regardless of where an older adult is at age or ailment wise, your child will cherish the memories they create with their grandparent, older relative or family friend. It's not about creating a masterpiece or an academy award-winning documentary, but instead, creating memories.

CONNECT....

Memory Jar: At home, brainstorm with your child about things they want to know about their grandparent. Put the questions on pieces of paper to go into a jar. Bring the jar along on visits. Even if the grandparent has dementia, recalling the good old days is often easier than recalling what they had for breakfast.

Play Ball: Well, not literally. Is your teen into a sport? Visiting grandpa to watch the big game on television is a way to connect in a less pressure-filled way than if they had to sit face to face and come up with conversation. Don't forget the snacks!

Video Calls: Is there a loved one who lives far away? Arrange a video chat for when you will be visiting. Put your child in charge of the technology.

Read a Book: Have a grandchild read to a grandparent, especially if it is a topic both are interested.

Go on a Winter Picnic: This can be especially fun with younger children. Pack a lunch with some lemonade and head over for an indoor visit. No one has to leave the comfort or safety of home. Bonus points if you play ambient outdoor sounds while you "picnic."

Pajama Day: If a grandparent is ill and bedridden in pj's, show support and have all visitors show up in their pj's! Kids love leaving the house in their jammies!

Snail Mail: Great for maintaining long distance relationships is having a child create a series of greeting cards that can then be mailed out once a week to ensure their grandparent has a happy surprise in the mail.

DISCOVER....

Food Fridays: Bring an exotic fruit or vegetable for your child to introduce and discover with their grandparent.

Scented Saturdays: Bring in items with different scents like soap, candles, essential oils, and foods. With eyes closed have everyone name the smell. It's trickier to do than you think!

SOOTHE....

Spa Sundays: Have your teen pamper grandma with a manicure or treat grandpa to a shoulder massage. These activities are warm and loving ways to connect and extend the healing power of touch.

Pet Therapy: Have a calm family pet? Bring them along for a visit. Having a pet to stroke is proven to calm individuals who have a variety of stresses.

Coloring Time: Adult coloring books are all the rage to promote relaxation. Pair a coloring book with colored pencils, an adult, and a child and watch both get *drawn into* sharing a moment. Pun intended!

MOVE....

Strike Up the Band: Especially fun for younger children, bring handheld instruments like shakers and tambourines to play. Sing and play along to old favorite tunes that you have stored on your smartphone.

Whee For Wii: Many care facilities have a Wii game system. Ask if you can access it and play Wii Bowling, Wii Sports or Just Dance. Or, if a television is in the room (and space is available) your home system could be brought in for the day.

Simon Says: This is a fun game to get an older adult moving in the comfort and safety of their chair. Have everyone take turns challenging one another to reach for the sky, flap their arms like a bird, swim in the sea, run in place. You get the gist.

Take A Hike: Well, how about just a stroll around the inside or outside of the home. You could also drive to a nearby park and cruise around the lake or down a smoothly paved path. Even sitting with your parent on a bench while you enjoy watching your children play on the swings can be a win for the whole crowd.

Un-Halloween: Find some healthy treats like sliced soft fruits or soothing travel sized hand lotions and a handmade note with happy messages on it deliver the treats to other neighbors or residents.

Play Paddle Balloon: Take a paint mixing stick and glue it to the back of a paper plate. Inflate a balloon. Play a game (or two or three) of paddle balloon!

What the Heck?: Fill a plastic tub with strips of shredded paper or loose packing material. Add objects like toy animal figures, clothespins, a spoon, sock – whatever you can think of - and try to identify what is inside without looking. You can theme the items for events or the seasons.

CREATE....

The Times They Are A-Changing: Decorate a grandparent's living space with holiday decorations. Your children can pre-create items or work on them during the visit and then grandma can proudly tape them up all over the place.

Picasso, Is That You?: Bring supplies and a drop cloth and create just-for-fun mini arts and crafts together.

Ride the Pony Express: Have a child take dictation and write a letter to someone their grandparent may want to send a communication.

REMEMBER:

Any of these activities can be adapted to best fit your specific caregiving situation. Don't be limited to thinking that you only a young child can play Paddle Balloon with someone because it could be a fun way for two adults to pass the afternoon. And by all means, replace the pronoun "grandparent" or "caree" for "parent", "aunt" or "friend" as needed.

Before you go, some quick tips are below!

QUICK TIPS: WAYS TO CONNECT WHEN SOMEONE HAS DEMENTIA

1. Set the intention for a calm + connected visit.
2. Engage your caree and remove distractions.
3. Speak slowly and simply.
4. Offer visual choices when you are able.
5. Be patient + don't contradict them.
6. Give simple step-by-step instructions.
7. Distract and redirect if they become upset.
8. Focus on the feelings being expressed if the words aren't making sense.
9. Reminisce about the good old days, not what happened yesterday.
10. Don't ask direct questions they may not have the answers to.

OF NOTE:

Offer the choice between two activities and let the grandparent choose which activity they would like to do to give them a sense of empowerment.

Go with the flow. If the grandparent wants to stop mid-activity, let them.

Let go of expectations. Everyone has a bad day, and you can't predict what you'll walk into at your visit.

Have fun! Joy is not age dependent. And, it's in the giving that we end up receiving. Experiencing this at an early age will carry across a lifetime.

OF NOTE FOR TEENS:

Your teenager can expand their experience to others within an assisted living community and could lead activities or games with the permission of the activity director. Many schools or civic organizations your teen may be involved in may count this as volunteer time toward required public service hours. And while you ideally want your teen to do things out of the goodness of their hearts, sometimes you need to lobby to the goodness of their college resumes.

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