Activity cards

51 activities · two cards per page, cut on the dashed line

CARD	ACTIVITY	PEOPLE	TIME	TYPE
1	Their Own Playlist	two or the whole family	10-60 min	Music
2	Kitchen Table Sing-Along	two or the whole family	10-25 min	Music
3	Kitchen Rhythm Band	2 to 8	10-20 min	Music
4	Slow Dance in the Living Room	2 to 8	5-15 min	Music
5	The Old-Time Radio Hour	two or the whole family	15-30 min	Music
6	Familiar Hymns, Prayers or Readings	two or the whole family	5-20 min	Music
7	Photo Album Afternoon	2 to 6	15-30 min	Photos and stories
8	A Box of Keepsakes	2 to 4	10-30 min	Photos and stories
9	Places I've Lived	2 to 6	15-30 min	Photos and stories
10	Old Catalog and Magazine Browsing	2 to 6	10-30 min	Photos and stories
11	Life Story Interviews	2 to 4	20-40 min	Photos and stories
12	Conversation Starter Cards	two or the whole family	10-20 min	Photos and stories
13	Folding Towels and Washcloths	2 to 4	10-30 min	Household tasks
14	Sock and Glove Matching	2 to 4	10-20 min	Household tasks
15	Setting the Table	2 to 6	5-15 min	Household tasks
16	Sorting the Silverware Drawer	2 to 3	10-20 min	Household tasks
17	Dusting and Wiping	2 to 3	5-20 min	Household tasks
18	Sweeping the Porch or Path	2 to 3	10-20 min	Household tasks
19	Sorting Coins or Buttons	2 to 3	10-20 min	Household tasks
20	Watering and Tending Houseplants	2 to 3	5-15 min	Household tasks
21	Sorting the Mail and Papers	2 to 3	10-20 min	Household tasks
22	No-Bake Treat	2 to 4	15-30 min	Kitchen
23	Snapping Beans or Shelling Peas	2 to 4	15-30 min	Kitchen
24	Washing Fruit and Vegetables	2 to 3	10-15 min	Kitchen
25	Cookie or Cracker Decorating	two or the whole family	15-30 min	Kitchen
26	Family Recipe Cards	2 to 6	20-40 min	Kitchen
27	Rummage Box	just the two of you	10-30 min	Hands and senses
28	Hand Massage With Lotion	just the two of you	5-15 min	Hands and senses
29	Fabric and Texture Squares	just the two of you	5-20 min	Hands and senses
30	Smells From Home	2 to 4	5-15 min	Hands and senses
31	Busy Apron or Fidget Blanket	just the two of you	10-60 min	Hands and senses
32	Pouring and Scooping Tray	just the two of you	10-20 min	Hands and senses
33	Nuts and Bolts	just the two of you	10-20 min	Hands and senses
34	Hair Brushing and Grooming	just the two of you	5-15 min	Hands and senses
35	Potting a Plant	2 to 4	15-30 min	Outdoors
36	Bird Watching From a Window	2 to 6	10-30 min	Outdoors
37	A Walk With a Job	2 to 4	10-30 min	Outdoors
38	Porch or Garden Sitting	two or the whole family	10-45 min	Outdoors
39	Raking Leaves or Weeding	2 to 4	10-25 min	Outdoors
40	Flower Arranging	2 to 6	15-30 min	Outdoors
41	Watercolor Wash Painting	2 to 6	15-30 min	Art and making
42	Coloring With Adult Designs	2 to 6	15-30 min	Art and making
43	Magazine Collage	2 to 6	20-40 min	Art and making
44	Making a Card for Someone	2 to 6	15-30 min	Art and making
45	Soft Clay and Dough	2 to 4	10-20 min	Art and making
46	Balloon Tap	2 to 8	5-15 min	Simple games
47	Beanbag Toss Into a Basket	2 to 8	10-20 min	Simple games
48	Dominoes, Loosely	2 to 4	15-30 min	Simple games
49	Picture Matching Cards	2 to 4	10-20 min	Simple games
50	Finish the Saying	two or the whole family	10-15 min	Simple games
51	Sorting a Deck of Cards	2 to 4	10-15 min	Simple games

Free to print and copy for your family, support group or clients. From partygamebook.com/dementia-activities/

Their Own Playlist

two or the whole family · 10-60 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

A short playlist of songs the person loved as a young adult, played at a set time each day or whenever a lift is needed.

YOU NEED

A phone, tablet or radio, a speaker or headphones

SETUP

Ask family which singers, hymns or dance-band tunes were played at home, at their wedding or on the car radio. Start with 10 to 15 songs.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Sit together and start with a favorite.
2. Watch the person's face and hands. Keep songs that bring a smile, tapping or singing along; drop songs that bring tears or restlessness.
3. Let the playlist run in the background while you do something else together.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Keep the volume moderate and skip anything with sudden loud parts.
- Some songs bring back grief. If a song upsets them, switch and stay close.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: let them build the playlist with you and tell you why each song matters.
- Middle stage: play the same few songs at the same time each day, so music becomes part of the routine.
- Later stage: play quietly, sit close and hold a hand. Headphones can help in a noisy house if they're comfortable wearing them.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Don't quiz them on titles or singers. Just enjoy it together.
- If they want it off, turn it off and try again another time of day.

VARIATIONS

- Make a separate calm playlist for evenings and a bright one for mornings.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

cut

Kitchen Table Sing-Along

two or the whole family · 10-25 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

Singing familiar songs together: hymns, folk songs, the birthday song, songs from school or the radio of their youth.

SETUP

Pick five songs everyone knows well. Large-print the titles if the person still reads; skip printed words for later stages.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Start singing yourself, a little slower than usual.
2. Pause before a familiar line and let them fill it in, if they want to.
3. Clap, sway or tap along. Finish with their favorite.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Some people feel self-conscious singing. Humming and clapping are just as good.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: ask them to pick the songs and lead one.
- Middle stage: stick to songs learned in childhood; these are often the best remembered.
- Later stage: hum or sing softly while holding hands. Responding with a smile counts as joining in.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they stop singing, keep going on your own for a verse. Many people rejoin.
- Never correct a word or a note.

VARIATIONS

- Invite grandkids on a video call for one song.

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Kitchen Rhythm Band

2 to 8 people · 10-20 min · fully seated · gentle · stage: early to later

Tapping along to music with homemade instruments: spoons on a pot, a sealed rice shaker, clapping.

YOU NEED

Wooden spoons, a plastic container with a lid, a dry rice shaker in a sealed bottle

SETUP

Make a shaker by sealing dry rice in a small plastic bottle with tape over the cap. Set out two or three instruments on the table.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Play an upbeat song they know.
2. Tap the beat yourself and hand them an instrument.
3. Swap instruments halfway through.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Seal shakers well; loose rice or beans are a choking risk.
- Keep the volume low if noise causes distress.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: take turns leading a rhythm the other copies.
- Middle stage: one instrument at a time keeps choices simple.
- Later stage: tap gently on their hand or knee in time with the music.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If tapping feels childish to them, switch to clapping or just listening.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

cut

Slow Dance in the Living Room

2 to 8 people · 5-15 min · some standing · gentle · stage: early to middle

Swaying, stepping or slow dancing to a song from their dancing years.

SETUP

Clear rugs and clutter from a small area. Choose a slow song from their youth.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Offer both hands and ask, “May I have this dance?”
2. Sway in place or take small steps.
3. Sit down together after one or two songs.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Check balance first; stay near a chair and wear non-slip shoes.
- Stop at the first sign of dizziness or tiredness.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: try the dances they did as a young adult.
- Middle stage: sway in place holding both hands, near a sturdy chair.
- Seated: hold hands and sway from a chair, or move arms to the beat.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they decline, sit and hold hands to the same song instead.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

The Old-Time Radio Hour

two or the whole family · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Listening together to old radio shows, a ballgame broadcast or a recording of a favorite comedian.

YOU NEED

A phone or smart speaker

SETUP

Many public libraries and archives offer free old-time radio recordings. Pick one short episode.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Sit somewhere comfortable with a snack or drink.
2. Play the episode and react together.
3. Chat afterward about who they listened to growing up.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Skip shows with loud gunfire or scary plots if they startle easily.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: ask what shows were on in their house and look them up together.
- Middle stage: short clips of 10 minutes or less.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they lose the thread, switch to music instead.

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Familiar Hymns, Prayers or Readings

two or the whole family · 5-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

For people of faith, a familiar prayer, psalm, hymn or blessing said or sung together, in the words they learned long ago.

SETUP

Ask family or their faith community which words and songs they used. Use only what fits the person's own tradition.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Sit together at a quiet time of day.
2. Begin the prayer or hymn slowly and leave room for them to join.
3. Sit quietly for a moment afterward.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Follow the person's own faith or none. Never introduce a new tradition.

BY STAGE

- Middle and later stage: the oldest familiar words are often the ones that stay. Say them at the same time each day.
- Many congregations offer home visits; ask.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they seem unsettled, end gently with a short blessing or a hand squeeze.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

Photo Album Afternoon

2 to 6 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Looking through old photos together and letting them tell the stories, with no quiz.

YOU NEED

A photo album or printed photos

SETUP

Choose 10 to 15 photos, mostly from their younger years. Label the backs with names and places so you don't have to ask.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Sit side by side and hold the album between you.
2. Point to one photo and say what you notice: "Look at that car."
3. Let them lead. If they name someone wrongly, go with it.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Photos of people who have died can bring fresh grief. Watch their face and move on gently if needed.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: record their stories on your phone while you go.
- Middle stage: fewer photos, larger prints, one at a time.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Say "tell me about this" rather than "who is this?"
- If they're tired of photos, close the album and have tea.

VARIATIONS

- Make a small "this is your life" book with one photo and one line per page.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

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A Box of Keepsakes

2 to 4 people · 10-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

A box of real objects tied to their life (a tool, a recipe card, a scarf, a medal, a ticket stub) to hold, look at and talk about.

YOU NEED

A shoebox, keepsakes from their work, hobby or past

SETUP

Gather 6 to 10 sturdy objects. For a former nurse: a cap, a watch, a bandage tin. For a mechanic: clean tools, a spark plug, a manual.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Put the box on the table and lift the lid.
2. Take out one thing and hand it over.
3. Talk about the object, not about memory: how it feels, what it was for.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- No sharp edges, tiny parts or anything small enough to swallow.
- Keep precious originals safe; use copies or stand-ins.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: choose soft or smooth objects that feel good to hold.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they pack it all away, that's an activity too. Let them.

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Places I've Lived

2 to 6 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Finding their hometown, old streets and travel spots on a map or a street-view app, and talking about each place.

YOU NEED

A printed map or a tablet with maps

SETUP

Look up two or three addresses ahead of time so you aren't searching while they wait.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Show the town on a map first, then zoom to the street.
2. Ask what they see and what's changed.
3. Keep a list of the places they light up about.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- A torn-down family home can be upsetting. Preview it first.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: a single place per session, with big pictures.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If the screen is confusing, print one large photo instead.

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Old Catalog and Magazine Browsing

2 to 6 people · 10-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Paging through pictures of cars, kitchens, fashions and prices from their younger years, and saying what you notice.

YOU NEED

Old magazines, catalogs or a picture book of past decades

SETUP

Libraries and thrift stores often have picture books of past decades. Flag a few pages that fit their life.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Turn pages slowly together.
2. Point and comment: “Did you ever have a stove like that?”
3. Let them choose what to linger on.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: price-guessing with old ads is fun and quick.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If reading is hard, cover the text and look at pictures only.

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Life Story Interviews

2 to 4 people · 20-40 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early

Short recorded interviews about their life, which family can keep and care staff can read later.

YOU NEED

A phone to record, a notebook

SETUP

Pick one theme per session: school days, first job, a wedding, a pet, a hometown.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Ask one open question and listen.
2. Follow their lead; side stories are welcome.
3. Write down names and details afterward for the book.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Some memories are painful. Never push a topic they avoid.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: they can choose photos and approve each page.
- Middle stage: switch to the keepsake box or photo album instead.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Stop after 20 minutes even if it's going well; end on a good story.

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Conversation Starter Cards

two or the whole family · 10-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Open, no-wrong-answer questions on cards, drawn one at a time at meals or on visits.

YOU NEED

The printable question cards on this page

SETUP

Print the conversation cards from this page and keep a few in a jar on the table.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Draw a card and read it aloud.
2. Answer it yourself first if they hesitate.
3. Pass the jar to a visitor so everyone takes a turn.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: yes-or-no or this-or-that versions are easier: "Summer or winter?"

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If a question draws a blank, answer it yourself and move on.

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Folding Towels and Washcloths

2 to 4 people · 10-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

Folding a basket of warm, clean towels, one of the most familiar jobs there is.

YOU NEED

A basket of clean towels, washcloths or napkins

SETUP

Use small items (washcloths, hand towels, napkins). Warm from the dryer feels good.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Sit across from each other with the basket between you.
2. Fold one yourself, slowly.
3. Hand one over and say thanks for the help.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: smoothing and stacking counts. So does just holding a warm towel.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Never refold in front of them.
- If they stop, thank them for the help and put the basket away.

VARIATIONS

- Pair clean socks, or roll dish towels for a drawer.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

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Sock and Glove Matching

2 to 4 people · 10-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Matching pairs from a pile of clean socks.

YOU NEED

Clean socks in a few colors and patterns

SETUP

Choose 8 to 12 pairs that look clearly different from each other.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Spread the socks on a table.
2. Match one pair together.
3. Let them carry on at their pace.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: fewer pairs, bolder colors.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If matching frustrates them, switch to folding instead.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

Setting the Table

2 to 6 people · 5-15 min · some standing · gentle · stage: early to middle

Setting the table for a meal, a real job that ends with sitting down together.

YOU NEED

Placemats, napkins, unbreakable plates and cups, spoons and forks

SETUP

Put everything needed in one spot. Remove knives.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Ask for help: "Could you put a napkin at each place?"
2. Give one item type at a time.
3. Sit down together when it's done.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Use unbreakable dishes if grip is weak.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: one item at a time, and use placemats as clear targets.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Whatever arrangement they choose is fine.

cut

Sorting the Silverware Drawer

2 to 3 people · 10-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Sorting a pile of clean spoons and forks into a drawer tray.

YOU NEED

Clean spoons and forks, a cutlery tray

SETUP

Use spoons and forks only. Leave knives and sharp utensils out.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Put the clean pile and the empty tray on the table.
2. Sort a few yourself.
3. Hand over the rest.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Never include knives, skewers or peelers.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: just two kinds, spoons and forks.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If it's not working, make it a joint job: you hand, they place.

Dusting and Wiping

2 to 3 people · 5-20 min · some standing · gentle · stage: early to later

Wiping a table, dusting a shelf or polishing a window with a damp cloth.

YOU NEED

A soft cloth, a spray bottle of plain water

SETUP

Use plain water in the bottle. Lock away cleaning chemicals.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Hand over a cloth and point to the table.
2. Wipe alongside them.
3. Thank them for a job well done.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Never use real cleaning products; they can be mistaken for drinks.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: smoothing a cloth on a table can be calming in itself.
- The Alzheimer's Association suggests turning repeated rubbing of a surface into this kind of task.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Don't redo the job while they're watching.

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cut

Sweeping the Porch or Path

2 to 3 people · 10-20 min · some standing · gentle · stage: early to middle

Sweeping a porch, patio or garage floor, outside in the fresh air.

YOU NEED

A broom

SETUP

Pick a flat, dry area without steps.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Start sweeping, then hand over the broom.
2. Hold the dustpan.
3. Sit down for a drink afterward.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Avoid steps, wet surfaces and ice.
- Watch balance and stop if they're tired.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: a short-handled broom or a dust mop may be easier.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they wander off with the broom, follow and keep it company. No rush.

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Sorting Coins or Buttons

2 to 3 people · 10-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Sorting a jar of loose change by size, or large buttons by color, into a muffin tin.

YOU NEED

A jar of coins, a muffin tin or small bowls

SETUP

Use coins or buttons larger than a quarter for anyone who puts things in their mouth, or skip this one.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Tip a handful onto a tray with a lip.
2. Sort a few into the tin together.
3. Count the quarters at the end if they enjoy numbers.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Small objects are a choking risk. Skip this if the person mouths objects.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: rolling coins in paper wrappers is a real job.
- Middle stage: two or three categories only.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If sorting is frustrating, just let them pour and stir the coins.

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cut

Watering and Tending Houseplants

2 to 3 people · 5-15 min · some standing · calm · stage: early to middle

Watering plants, wiping leaves and pinching off dead flowers.

YOU NEED

A small watering can, houseplants

SETUP

A small watering can with only a cup of water in it prevents floods.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Walk to the plants together.
2. Hand over the can.
3. Wipe dust from big leaves with a damp cloth.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Some houseplants are toxic if eaten. Know yours, especially with later-stage dementia.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: one plant per day, the same time each day.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Overwatering is fine for one day. Most plants survive it.

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HOUSEHOLD TASKS

Sorting the Mail and Papers

2 to 3 people · 10-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early

Sorting a stack of junk mail, folding letters into envelopes, or stamping old envelopes, for someone who worked in an office.

YOU NEED

Junk mail and old catalogs, envelopes

SETUP

Remove anything with real account numbers. Use only junk mail you're happy to recycle.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Hand over the stack: "Could you help me sort these?"
2. Make two piles: keep and recycle.
3. Thank them for getting through it.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Keep important papers and checkbooks out of reach.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: just folding paper into envelopes.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they want to keep everything, let them. Recycle it later.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

cut

KITCHEN

No-Bake Treat

2 to 4 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Stirring, measuring and pressing a simple no-bake recipe, like snack mix, overnight oats or fruit and yogurt cups.

YOU NEED

A big bowl and a wooden spoon, ingredients for a no-bake recipe

SETUP

Pre-measure the ingredients into cups. Keep the stove off and knives away.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Pour one cup into the bowl at a time.
2. Hand over the spoon to stir.
3. Taste together at the end.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Check diet orders, allergies and swallowing safety. Avoid nuts, hard candy and popcorn if swallowing is a concern.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: one job only, stirring or scooping.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they lose interest, finish it and serve it with a cup of tea.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

Snapping Beans or Shelling Peas

2 to 4 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Snapping the ends off green beans, a familiar job for many people who grew up with a garden.

YOU NEED

Fresh green beans or peas in the pod, two bowls

SETUP

Wash the beans first. Put the full bowl on one side and the empty one on the other.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Snap a few yourself to show the motion.
2. Hand over a small pile.
3. Cook them for dinner and say who helped.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Watch that they don't eat raw beans in large amounts.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: shelling is fiddly; snapping is easier.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Imperfect snaps are fine. Everything still gets cooked.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

cut

Washing Fruit and Vegetables

2 to 3 people · 10-15 min · some standing · calm · stage: early to later

Scrubbing potatoes or washing apples in a bowl of water.

YOU NEED

A bowl of cool water, potatoes, apples or carrots, a vegetable brush, a towel

SETUP

Set up at a table with a towel underneath, rather than at the sink.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Put a potato in the water and scrub it.
2. Hand over the brush.
3. Lay clean ones on the towel to dry.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Cool or lukewarm water only.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: the feel of cool water and a smooth apple is the activity.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If water gets splashed, that's what the towel is for.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

Cookie or Cracker Decorating

two or the whole family · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Spreading frosting or cream cheese on cookies or crackers and adding a topping, a good one to share with grandkids.

YOU NEED

Plain cookies or crackers, soft spread or frosting, a butter knife for spreading only

SETUP

Use soft toppings. Check swallowing safety before using sprinkles or hard toppings.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Spread one together.
2. Offer two topping choices.
3. Plate them up for the family.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Check diet, diabetes care and swallowing safety first.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: spreading only, no toppings.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If the spreading is hard, let them press toppings on instead.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

cut

Family Recipe Cards

2 to 6 people · 20-40 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early

Reading through old family recipes and writing out favorites for the grandkids.

YOU NEED

Old recipe cards or a cookbook, index cards and a pen

SETUP

Pull out handwritten cards if you have them; the handwriting itself often sparks stories.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Read a recipe aloud together.
2. Ask how they made it and who they made it for.
3. Copy it onto a new card in your writing or theirs.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: just read and talk; skip the writing.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If memories of a recipe are fuzzy, that's fine. Write the version they tell today.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

Rummage Box

just the two of you · 10-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: middle to later

A box of safe, interesting things to look through, take out and put back, with no right way to do it.

YOU NEED

A shoebox or basket, safe objects to sort and handle

SETUP

Fill it around a theme: sewing (big spools, fabric squares, a tape measure), office (envelopes, a stapler without staples), tools (clean large wrenches, a tape measure).

HOW TO DO IT

1. Set the box in reach and lift the lid.
2. Take one thing out and hand it over.
3. Let them take over. Taking everything out and putting it back in is the activity.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Nothing small enough to swallow, nothing sharp, no batteries.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: fewer, larger, softer items.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they lose interest, put it within reach and leave it there.

VARIATIONS

- Make a few boxes and rotate them by week.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

cut

Hand Massage With Lotion

just the two of you · 5-15 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

A slow hand massage with lotion, a calm way to connect when words are hard.

YOU NEED

A mild or favorite-scented lotion, a towel

SETUP

Warm the lotion in your hands first. Sit at eye level beside them.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Ask first: “Can I put some lotion on your hands?”
2. Use slow, gentle strokes from wrist to fingertips.
3. Talk softly or play quiet music.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Check for skin allergies, cuts and sore joints. Use gentle pressure only.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: the Alzheimer's Association suggests lotion with a favorite scent as a way to express caring through touch.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they pull away, stop and try later, or offer the lotion for them to rub in themselves.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

Fabric and Texture Squares

just the two of you · 5-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: middle to later

Squares of different fabrics to stroke, fold and talk about, either loose in a basket or glued to a board.

YOU NEED

Fabric scraps: velvet, corduroy, fleece, silk, burlap, a board or a large piece of cardboard

SETUP

Cut 6 to 10 squares about the size of a hand. Hem or glue the edges so they don't fray.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Lay out three squares.
2. Stroke one and describe it: soft, scratchy, smooth.
3. Hand them over to feel.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- No buttons, beads or loose threads that could be pulled off and swallowed.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: one soft square to hold can be enough.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they want to keep one square, let them.

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cut

Smells From Home

2 to 4 people · 5-15 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

Sniffing familiar scents (coffee, cinnamon, orange, lavender) and talking about what they bring to mind.

YOU NEED

Small lidded jars, cotton balls, cinnamon, coffee grounds, lemon peel, vanilla, pine

SETUP

Put a little of each scent on a cotton ball in a jar. Make 4 to 6 jars.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Open one jar and hold it near, not under, their nose.
2. Ask what it reminds them of.
3. Close it and try the next.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Many people with dementia have a weaker sense of smell. Don't push. Avoid strong essential oils near the face.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: no guessing; just enjoy each smell.
- Later stage: one familiar smell at a time.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they don't respond, try food smells at mealtime instead.

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Busy Apron or Fidget Blanket

just the two of you · 10-60 min · fully seated · calm · stage: middle to later

A lap blanket or apron with zippers, ribbons and pockets for restless hands.

YOU NEED

An apron or lap blanket, zippers, large buttons, ribbons and pockets sewn on securely

SETUP

Sew everything on very securely. Many craft groups and libraries offer free patterns.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Lay it on their lap during TV, car rides or waiting rooms.
2. Show one zipper or pocket.
3. Leave it with them.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Check it every week for loose buttons or threads.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: big, soft pieces only.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If it's ignored, move it near the TV chair and try another day.

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Pouring and Scooping Tray

just the two of you · 10-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: middle

Pouring dry pasta from cup to cup, or scooping it into jars, at a table.

YOU NEED

A rimmed tray, dry pasta shapes or large beans, cups and scoops

SETUP

Use large pasta shapes. Work on a rimmed tray so nothing rolls away.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Pour one cup into another.
2. Hand over the scoop.
3. Fill jars to put away.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Skip this if the person puts things in their mouth. Use large pieces only.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If it feels pointless to them, call it a pantry job: filling jars.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

Nuts and Bolts

just the two of you · 10-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Screwing large nuts onto bolts, a good fit for people who liked tools and fixing things.

YOU NEED

Large nuts, bolts and washers (at least 1 inch), a tray

SETUP

Use big pieces only, at least an inch across.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Show one nut going on.
2. Hand over a few bolts.
3. Unscrew them later to start again.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- No small parts if there's any chance of mouthing.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: three or four pieces at a time.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If hands are stiff, try PVC pipe pieces that push together instead.

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Hair Brushing and Grooming

just the two of you · 5-15 min · fully seated · calm · stage: middle to later

Slow, gentle hair brushing, a calming touch the Alzheimer's Association lists among later-stage comforts.

YOU NEED

A soft brush, a mirror (optional)

SETUP

Pick a quiet time. Sit them in a comfortable chair with support for their head.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Ask first, and say what you're doing.
2. Brush slowly and gently.
3. Finish with a compliment.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Use a soft brush and watch for scalp sensitivity.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: short sessions, very gentle strokes.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they don't want it, stop and offer the brush to them.

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Potting a Plant

2 to 4 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · gentle · stage: early to middle

Filling a pot with soil and planting a herb or flower, at a table outside or on newspaper inside.

YOU NEED

A pot, potting soil, a small plant or seeds, gloves

SETUP

Set everything up at a table so nobody has to kneel.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Scoop soil together.
2. Settle the plant in.
3. Water it and pick a sunny spot.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Some plants and fertilizers are toxic. Choose safe herbs and keep chemicals away. Wash hands after.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: plan a small container garden together.
- Middle stage: one pot, one plant.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Spilled soil is part of gardening. Sweep it up together.

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Bird Watching From a Window

2 to 6 people · 10-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

Watching birds at a feeder from a comfortable chair.

YOU NEED

A bird feeder, a chair by the window, a picture guide (optional)

SETUP

Hang a feeder where it's visible from their favorite chair. It may take a week or two for birds to find it.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Sit together with a cup of tea.
2. Point out birds and colors.
3. Keep a simple tally on a notepad if they enjoy it.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: just watching movement outside the window counts.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If no birds come, watch the street, the clouds or a nature video instead.

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OUTDOORS

A Walk With a Job

2 to 4 people · 10-30 min · some standing · up and moving · stage: early to middle

A short walk with a reason: to the mailbox, around the block to see a neighbor's flowers, or to the park bench.

SETUP

Know your route and its benches. Carry water and a phone.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Give the walk a purpose: “Let's go get the mail.”
2. Walk at their pace and point out what you see.
3. Rest on the way back.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Wear an ID bracelet or carry ID if they could get separated from you.
- Avoid ice, heat and uneven paths.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: the same short route each time.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they want to turn back, turn back.

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OUTDOORS

Porch or Garden Sitting

two or the whole family · 10-45 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

Sitting outside together on a nice day, which the Alzheimer's Association suggests for later stages too.

SETUP

Find shade and a chair with arms. Bring a drink.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Sit together and notice sounds, smells and weather.
2. Chat or just sit.
3. Head in before they're cold or tired.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Watch for sun, heat and cold; older adults can overheat or chill quickly.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: a wheelchair by an open door counts.

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Raking Leaves or Weeding

2 to 4 people · 10-25 min · some standing · up and moving · stage: early to middle

Raking a small patch of leaves or pulling easy weeds from a raised bed, for people who loved yard work.

YOU NEED

A light rake, gloves, a bag or tarp

SETUP

Choose a small, flat area. Use a lightweight rake.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Rake alongside them.
2. Hold the bag open.
3. Stop for a drink.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Watch for tripping, heat and tiredness. Gloves on.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: picking up sticks or filling the bag is enough.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Job-done is whatever gets done.

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Flower Arranging

2 to 6 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Arranging cut flowers in a vase for the table.

YOU NEED

Flowers from the garden or grocery store, a vase or jar

SETUP

Pre-cut stems to length. Remove thorns.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Lay the flowers on a towel.
2. Hand them one at a time.
3. Put the vase where they'll see it all day.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Remove thorns. Some flowers are toxic if eaten; choose safe ones.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: smelling and holding flowers is the activity.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Any arrangement is a good arrangement.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

Watercolor Wash Painting

2 to 6 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Brushing wide washes of color across wet paper and watching them blend. No drawing skill needed.

YOU NEED

Watercolor paper, a watercolor set, a wide brush, a cup of water

SETUP

Tape the paper to the table. Wet it first so colors spread easily.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Dip the brush and sweep color across the paper.
2. Hand over the brush.
3. Hang the finished paintings up.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Use non-toxic paint and keep the rinse water away from drinks.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: one or two colors only.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Don't ask what it is. Say what you like about the colors.

cut

Coloring With Adult Designs

2 to 6 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Coloring large, grown-up designs: flowers, quilts, cars, landscapes.

YOU NEED

Adult coloring pages with large shapes, colored pencils or markers

SETUP

Pick designs with large spaces. Avoid anything that looks like a children's coloring book.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Color alongside them.
2. Offer two or three colors at a time.
3. Date and display the page.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: thick markers are easier to grip.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If it feels childish to them, stop. Try painting or flower arranging instead.

Magazine Collage

2 to 6 people · 20-40 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Choosing pictures from magazines and gluing them onto a card around a theme: gardens, food, travel, a favorite color.

YOU NEED

Old magazines, a glue stick, a sheet of card

SETUP

Pre-cut a pile of pictures if scissors are hard to use.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Spread out the pictures.
2. Ask which they like best.
3. Glue them on together.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Child-safe scissors only, if any.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: choose and press only; you do the glue.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Talk about the pictures as you go; the chat matters more than the collage.

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Making a Card for Someone

2 to 6 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Making a birthday, thank-you or get-well card for a real person, which gives the craft a purpose.

YOU NEED

Blank cards, stickers, stamps or pictures, a pen

SETUP

The Alzheimer's Association notes that a card for a friend may draw someone in more than a craft for its own sake. Choose a real recipient.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Say who the card is for.
2. Pick stickers or pictures together.
3. Write the message together and mail it.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: they choose and press stickers; you write.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If the handwriting is shaky, it's still their card. Send it.

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Soft Clay and Dough

2 to 4 people · 10-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to later

Squeezing, rolling and shaping soft dough at the table.

YOU NEED

Soft modeling clay or homemade salt dough

SETUP

Use soft clay that's easy to squeeze. Warm it in your hands first.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Roll a ball yourself.
2. Hand over a piece.
3. Make simple shapes, or just squeeze.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Supervise; dough and clay can be mistaken for food. Skip if they mouth objects.

BY STAGE

- Later stage: holding and squeezing warm dough is enough.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Don't ask them to make something specific.

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Balloon Tap

2 to 8 people · 5-15 min · fully seated · gentle · stage: early to middle

Tapping a balloon back and forth while seated, a gentle movement game with lots of laughs.

YOU NEED

A balloon (or a beach ball)

SETUP

Clear space around chairs. Use a latex-free balloon if anyone has a latex allergy.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Sit facing each other.
2. Tap the balloon gently to them.
3. Count taps together if they enjoy it.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Latex allergy risk; check first. A popped balloon can startle; use a soft beach ball if that worries you.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: slow, short rounds.
- Grandkids make great partners.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they don't return it, toss it again. There's no losing.

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Beanbag Toss Into a Basket

2 to 8 people · 10-20 min · fully seated · gentle · stage: early to middle

Tossing rolled socks or beanbags into a basket a few feet away.

YOU NEED

Beanbags or rolled socks, a laundry basket

SETUP

Put the basket close enough that most throws land.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Take turns tossing.
2. Cheer every throw.
3. Move the basket closer if needed.

SAFETY AND COMFORT

- Keep the area clear so nobody trips fetching beanbags.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: drop the scoring.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they're missing a lot, move the basket. Success is the point.

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Dominoes, Loosely

2 to 4 people · 15-30 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Playing dominoes, or just matching the dots, at the kitchen table.

YOU NEED

A set of large dominoes

SETUP

Large dominoes with bold dots are easiest to see.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Play by the usual rules if that works.
2. Or turn them face up and match numbers together.
3. Stack them in towers if that's what they want.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: match the dots only, no scoring.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Let them play their way. Don't correct moves.

Free to print and copy. Not medical advice.

Picture Matching Cards

2 to 4 people · 10-20 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Matching pairs of cards with all of them face up, so it's about matching, not memory.

YOU NEED

Two decks of cards or matching photos

SETUP

Use 6 to 10 pairs, face up.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Lay the cards out face up.
2. Find one pair together.
3. Let them find the rest.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: a classic face-down memory game may still be fine.
- Middle stage: face up, fewer pairs.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- Never turn this into a memory test.

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Finish the Saying

two or the whole family · 10-15 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

You start a familiar saying (“An apple a day…”) and they finish it. Long-held sayings often stay longest.

SETUP

Write 20 sayings from their era and region.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Say the first half slowly.
2. Pause and let them finish.
3. Laugh about the funny ones.

BY STAGE

- Middle stage: fill it in together if they hesitate.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If they don't finish it, say the end yourself with a smile.

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Sorting a Deck of Cards

2 to 4 people · 10-15 min · fully seated · calm · stage: early to middle

Sorting a shuffled deck into red and black, or into the four suits.

YOU NEED

A deck of playing cards

SETUP

Use a large-print deck if you have one.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Spread a handful on the table.
2. Sort a few by color together.
3. Let them carry on.

BY STAGE

- Early stage: sort into suits, then into order.
- Middle stage: red and black only.

IF THEY GET FRUSTRATED

- If it frustrates them, play a simple game like War instead.

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