

Meaningful Engagement When Your Loved One Has Dementia

by Nancy Kriseman, LCSW

As an eldercare Clinical Social Worker, I have worked with individuals who are living with dementia and those caring for them for over 35 years. Midway through my career, my mother was diagnosed with probable Alzheimers at age 71 and died at 87. As mom's dementia progressed, she had to move into assisted living, and then later into a nursing home. I soon realized that spending time together without a specific plan was often unpleasant for us both. Meaningful engagement was up to me! I had to be mindful of her strengths and abilities and continually adapt to where she was cognitively, emotionally, and physically.

Instead of thinking about her condition in doom and gloom terms, I became determined to find positive ways we could spend time together. Most of my visits involved some sort of activity that we could engage in together. We listened to her favorite singers and musicians. We watched *Golden Girls* and *I Love Lucy* episodes, laughing ourselves silly. I brought an electric skillet and cooked up snacks for her. I also brought my blender and made fruit smoothies and chocolate milk shakes. When it became more difficult for mom to communicate, I came up with the idea of a spa day. We would go into the hair salon and I washed her hair and face with nice smelling soaps and then completed her experience with massaging lavender lotion on her face, hands, and arms. She loved this special attention and it made me feel happy as well. At the end of her life when mom was mostly in her bed, I would sit by her side and read to her. However, the most special times were when I decided to get in bed with her! I would lie next to her and sing to her. It reminded me of the times that mom would crawl in bed with me when I was a young child and would sing to me.

My experiences with my mother and my concern for my clients who struggled with visiting, led me to write, *Meaningful Connections: Positive Ways to Be Together When a Loved One Has Dementia*. This book introduces care partners and professionals to person-centered activities and meaningful engagement ideas. A Dementia Abilities Continuum was developed as a tool to help care partners assess where their loved one might be cognitively. There are a variety of activity categories that care partners can choose from; with ideas, questions to discuss, and items to consider sections. At the end of each activity category are ways to adapt the activity based on the Dementia Abilities Continuum. There are short chapters on visiting tips, honoring care partner's own feelings, and how to visit at end of life. I also introduce Grab & Go Activity boxes, which are theme related collection of items that care partners and others can use when visiting. Each box can be tailored to your loved one's interests and contain objects related to a past interest or passion. My hope is that my book, *Meaningful Connections* will be a resource that can help care partners and those living with dementia truly enjoy meaningful time together!

Nancy L. Kriseman, LCSW, is a licensed clinical social worker who has worked with older people and their families for over 35 years. Nancy maintains a private practice in the Atlanta area, in addition to presenting workshops on caregiving and dementia across the country. She has written three books, *Meaningful Connections: Positive Ways to Be Together When a Loved One Has Dementia*, (2017); *The Mindful Caregiver: Finding Ease in the Caregiving Journey*, Roman and Littlefield publishers (2014) and *The Caring Spirit Approach to Eldercare: A Training Guide for Professionals and Families*, Health Professions Press (2005).