



## Creating Moments of Joy for People Living with Dementia Through Sensory Stimulation and Memory Boxes

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### How the Five Senses Effect Quality of Life

All five senses – sight, taste, smell, touch and hearing – are vital to our ability to connect with and make sense of the world around us. Although it's normal and natural to experience a decline in sensory function with aging, this process is more rapid and pronounced for people living with dementia.

What's surprising is just how much of a negative impact that diminishing senses can have on quality of life. Experiencing sensory loss may lead to feelings of isolation, heightened anxiety and depression. The good news is that caregivers have the power to bring joy, if only in the moment, to loved ones experiencing sensory loss using sensory stimulation and memory boxes.

The use of a memory box or a lap basket prompts conversation and evokes memories while providing a tremendous source of enjoyment for the person living with dementia – *and their loved one.*

## What is Sensory Stimulation?

Sensory stimulation is actually *brain* stimulation. Our brain processes sensory input (stimulation) and turns it into sensation. Your finger touches a hot burner and your brain registers pain. Olfactory nerves in your nose process stimulation as smells. In this way, the familiar scent of a rose triggers powerful pleasant, long-term memories of a favorite cutting garden, or the smell of fresh-baked cookies prompt memories of time with kids in the kitchen. Sensory experiences can successfully bypass difficulties inherent with traditional, verbal communication. As such, they provide a valuable and viable way to connect and communicate with a loved one even as disease progresses.

## Fill Up Your Senses

Simply stepping outdoors engages the senses from hearing birds chirp to smelling freshly cut grass to observing clouds move across the sky. But sensory stimulation is most engaging when it relates to someone's personal interests. For example, a choir member may respond to hearing music while a traveler may respond more to beach-scented aromatherapy. Whether looking at old family photographs or tasting comfort food, studies show that sensory stimulation can improve mood and self-esteem, increase communication and social interaction and bring many other benefits to people living with dementia.

## The Gift Inside a Memory Box

The use of a memory box or a lap basket prompts conversation and evokes memories while providing a tremendous source of enjoyment for the person living with dementia – *and their loved one.* Memory boxes not only promote recall and reminiscing of long-term memories of significant events and relationships, but they can inspire social engagement, provide sensory/mental stimulation, spur creativity and storytelling as well as provide additional insight into and connection with the individual.

Encouraging the exploration of simple items that evoke a sensory response, such as the texture of seashells collected while on vacation or the aroma and feel of soft leather on an old baseball glove, can provide pleasure and engagement for your loved one as well as reduce stress or anxiety. The memory box can include anything that has significance to loved ones and reflects their hobbies, interests or favorite things. Items can include both personal keepsakes and seemingly ordinary things. Incorporating trinkets that appeal to multiple senses can enrich the experience and deepen the engagement.

Possible items to include:

- Diaries/letters/newspaper articles
- A family heirloom
- Vacation souvenirs
- Family photos
- Grandchildren's artwork
- A trophy or medal
- Letter(s) from a loved one
- Handwritten copy of a favorite recipe
- Sheet music or a recording of a favorite song
- Old postcards/maps
- Jewelry (a favorite necklace or earrings)
- Old coins
- Wedding items (satin gloves, veil)
- Items related to a favorite hobby (sewing pattern, sketchbook, gardening gloves)



# Be a Family of Joy Makers

Involving the entire family in the creation of your loved one's memory box can be fun! Get creative (*think outside of the box!*) in selecting a suitable container that reflects a particular theme, is related to the items inside or holds some particular significance to the individual. It should be durable, easy to hold or lift and fit comfortably on your loved one's lap or a small table.

Note that it is entirely normal if your loved one doesn't initially recognize a certain item(s) at first or even seems confused

as to why something was included. Upon examination, they may discover new meaning for some things and a memento meant to stimulate one specific memory, may instead bring on another. Either way, the experience of exploring the box together can inspire the sharing of thoughts, feelings and even create new memories for the family.



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