

Dementia Inclusive Physical Activity

An inclusive community is one where people living with dementia are understood, respected, and fully supported, and this includes staying active. With the right support, people living with dementia or other changes in memory can stay active, connected, and confident. Dementia inclusive exercise isn't a major overhaul; it's a shift in awareness. When activity leaders, volunteers, and participants are informed and compassionate, people experiencing changes in memory can engage on their own terms. Together, we can build age-friendly communities where everyone belongs, and everyone moves.

Health Benefits of Physical Activity

Research shows that exercise can improve memory and thinking skills in people living with dementia or mild cognitive impairment. Following are 4 other benefits of physical activity:

1. Physical activity supports brain health by changing the chemicals in the brain so that new cells (neurons) and blood vessels can grow, and existing ones can function better.
2. Beyond cognition, regular exercise has also been shown to improve functional abilities and support greater independence in daily life.
3. Regular exercise improves cardiovascular health, balance and mobility, and strength and fitness.
4. It is associated with reduced risk of falls, stronger bones, better mood and a lower risk of depression.

The result: greater ability to stay independent and manage daily life, even with dementia or cognitive impairment.

John Richard Pagan says in “Pathways to Well Being with Dementia, a Manual of Help, Hope, and Inspiration,” “I started a gym membership which I do 2 to 3 times a week at a pace that is comfortable for me and does not overdo it. This has improved my mobility, assisted me in improving weight loss, and has generally given me new energy to enjoy each and every day.” You can download this manual from the Dementia Action Alliance on the web at [the Dementia Action Alliance](#)

Social Benefits of Physical Activity

For many people living with dementia, the social benefits of exercise provide important motivation. Encouragement, inclusion, and human connection are often the most valued parts of being physically active. Other social benefits include the following 4 things:

1. A sense of community and belonging
2. Greater confidence and mental well-being
3. Companionship and peer support,
4. A stronger sense of personal identity

Dave Baldrige says, in “Pathways to Well Being with Dementia,” “Exercise is so critical and I’m not as good at doing it. I have an exercise bike. When I exercise rigorously, it certainly improves my mental abilities, capacities, and outlook.”

Being Dementia Inclusive

Every person, with or without dementia, brings unique preferences, experiences, and abilities to a physical activity program. Honoring that individuality is at the heart of inclusive programming. Get to know your participants, what they enjoy, what motivates them, and what concerns they may have. Meet people where they are and recognize that abilities and preferences change over time. Above all, communicate clearly and be ready to adapt.

A Welcoming Environment Makes a Difference. Simple adjustments like clear, large-print signage at eye level, good lighting, unobstructed hallways, and thoughtful music choices can reduce confusion and help people feel at ease before a single exercise begins.

Day to Day Changes in Ability are Common. Because self monitoring can be affected by dementia, close observation is essential. Watch for non verbal signs of difficulty such as fatigue or pain and provide reminders as needed.

Encouragement and Support Are Deeply Valued. Helpful words from activity leaders and fellow participants are often a key reason people living with dementia choose to stay active. Always tailor your approach to individual preferences.

Exercise is an Opportunity to Show Improvement, Have Success, and Build Confidence. Build on individual strengths. Start simple, then challenge participants. Adapt movements or expectations as needed, knowing that confidence gained here carries into everyday life.

People living with dementia may need more time to learn and to communicate, and can feel overwhelmed in busy environments. Be patient, acknowledge feelings, and make decisions together.

Connect Through Communication

People living with dementia may experience changes in language and memory. Communication needs vary by person and by day. Always start by introducing yourself,

making eye contact, and giving the person your full attention. After that, get a sense of where someone is and choose your strategies accordingly. Following are nine more communication tips.

1. Speak slowly and share one message at a time.
2. Use simple, close ended questions with yes or no answers.
3. Demonstrate movements as you speak and allow extra time for the person to process what you've said.
4. Pay attention to feelings, actions, and words.
5. Support the person in their own reality, correction is rarely necessary.
6. Repeat or rephrase as needed and always ask how you can help rather than assuming.
7. Give people options whenever possible. People living with dementia often have few opportunities to make their own decisions. Offering simple choices fosters a sense of control, confidence, and belonging.
8. Avoid asking "do you remember?" Instead, name the exercise and demonstrate. Repeat cues slowly and allow plenty of time.
9. Always ask permission before using touch and consider providing a written plan with photos for reference.

A Word About Funding for this Project

This project is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling \$999,737.00 with 0% financed with non governmental sources. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit the HRSA website at [HRSA.gov](https://www.hrsa.gov)

This information is presented by the UMaine Center on Aging and the Aging ME Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program. You can contact Lifelong Maine by email at lifelong@maine.edu. You can visit Lifelong Maine on the web at [Lifelong Maine](https://lifelongmaine.org) and you can visit the Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program and Aging ME on the web at [Aging ME](https://agingme.org)