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**FIVE WAYS
TO MAKE**

**MEMORY CARE
MORE FUN**



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INTRODUCTION

“Did you get the pictures?” asked Katie as she peeked in my office door. “I emailed you pictures of us fishing at the trout pond.” I opened up my inbox to see what she had been up to. Who doesn’t like an afternoon spent with your fishing buddies? What is remarkable about this group is that seven of them have significant memory loss with varying levels of mobility and ability to communicate. You wouldn’t suspect as much from the pictures of smiling friends pulling in fish after fish. The great thing about Katie, our activity coordinator, is that she isn’t deterred by these kinds of limitations.

Caring for an aging relative can be a great challenge, especially when memory loss becomes a part of the equation. As time passes, it becomes more and more difficult to interact with your loved one, and greater assistance may be required. However, throughout the process, families and others providing care can experience joy, meaning, and yes...fun!

We define ourselves through our memories, and they shape how we perceive the world.

Short Term Memory

Short term memory⁽¹⁾, is what we use to remember small things like what we had for breakfast or watched on television last night. All memories start out in this category, and dissipate relatively quickly. Losing short term memory is often the first noticeable sign of Alzheimer's and other related forms of dementia.

Long Term Memory

Anything that the brain determines to be vital is “moved” from short-term to long-term memory⁽¹⁾. These memories are less affected by memory loss. The value our minds place on memory can often be out of sync with reality, which is why certain nonessential events like childhood experiences tend to crop up and while other items like where the car was parked seem to be forgotten.

How Are Memories Formed?

Memories are stored through the brain as groups of neurons send signals in particular patterns associated with an original event as it happens. The initial connections are very weak and decay in short order unless they are reinforced through increased usage⁽²⁾. This process functions throughout life with minimal changes as we age⁽³⁾. The region in which it happens, however, naturally shrinks starting when people reach their mid-20s. However, a healthy diet, plenty of exercise, and mental stimulation have all been shown to help delay this progression.

By addressing the three pillars of cognition: memory retention, social interaction, and new experiences, we can make a positive impact for someone living with dementia, actually delaying memory loss⁽²²⁾ and creating a special bond during this season of life.



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Chapter 1: Eat More Ice Cream



Ice cream brings more happiness than almost any other type of food. Cheap refrigeration of the 20th century made this tasty treat a mainstay in American's daily life. Not only was ice cream ubiquitous to growing up in America for a generation who may now be living with memory loss, but also it was served almost exclusively at happy moments and celebrations. Many have vivid memories of ice cream trucks, soda shops, and churning ice cream with friends and family. As a means of connecting someone with memories from childhood, ice cream is a fantastic conduit.

Our meals provide community, enjoyment, and memories that are part of who we are. Enjoying a favorite food or drink together can connect individuals with laughter. Why not bring that food we all remember to share with mom or dad, whether it's a special recipe at the holidays, a traditional meal shared on a regular basis from childhood, or personal favorites like chocolate.

Cooking or baking is not only fun to do together, but smelling bread or cookies in the oven and experiencing the process will trigger moments from childhood that may have been forgotten for years. Following a recipe exercises the mind, and time in the kitchen can further social engagement, especially if other friends and family members are present⁽¹⁵⁾. If your loved one is in a senior living community, consider inviting another resident to join in the fun or sharing the fruits of your labor with those who may not have many guests. Activity directors can be invaluable for setting up these times and knowing what best fits the residents.

Setting the table can imbue a sense of pride and usefulness for a person who has spent a lifetime taking care of others. Simple household tasks like folding laundry and sweeping the floor make great activities.

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Chapter 2: Show and Tell



Since the 1960s, reminiscence therapy has been used to provide a drug-free treatment option with no risky side effects⁽⁹⁾. Reinforcing memory helps your loved one stay connected and enjoy quality of life. Research shows that when we revisit older memories, we strengthen them. Walking down memory lane not only helps improve cognition, it provides a way for you to stay connected to your loved one.

Ask questions and allow your loved one to respond, following the conversation wherever it leads. You can cover stories, mishaps, vacations, and special moments. It is often the oldest memories that we remember best, so pay close attention to childhood games, homes, and pets⁽⁵⁾.

Most people collect all kinds of mementos from earlier years: photos, awards, pins, newspaper clippings, letters...the list goes on. As you uncover links to your loved one's past, create a collection of physical objects that can be used to keep memories alive⁽⁵⁾. Going through keepsakes with your loved one reinforces those important memories. Why not bring out your mother's favorite brooch on Mother's Day or give your dad a keychain from his favorite car!

Relatives, friends, and neighbors can be great sources for these keepsakes. Just having friends and family reminisce together can be lots of fun. And take the kids for a sure way to bring back memories and a smile to your loved one's face.

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Chapter 3: Make Music



Practicing music improves memory and concentration for individuals of all ages and neurological capabilities. In a recent study published by Hearing Journal, it was shown that three months of weekly piano lessons and practice helped improved overall processing speed and memory for adults between the ages of 60 to 85⁽⁶⁾. Music is a powerful tool for those with memory loss.

Familiar melodies impact the mind in ways that go well beyond regular conversation. The right song can shift mood, reduce stress, improve cognitive function, and stimulate rewarding social interactions⁽⁸⁾. Music requires little in the way of cognitive processing, especially for songs known “by heart.” Since this is different than most memory functions, it is usually left intact well into the final stages of the condition. Music is probably the quickest and easiest way to bring joy to an elder with memory loss. Here are some ways you can integrate music into your loved one’s life:

- ◆ Download a playlist of a top ten music list from young adulthood (concentrate on ages 18-25)
- ◆ Attend local music performances
- ◆ Get up and dance while you listen
- ◆ Sing-along together with tunes/hymns from childhood
- ◆ Encourage regular playing of a lifelong instrument such as a piano

Music often helps caregivers with activities of daily living such as getting dressed and grooming—turning challenging tasks into enjoyable interactions. Sing or hum along together with a familiar tune or turn on background music. Remember that the goal is to help connect the past to the present; this often occurs with strong emotion so be prepared for unexpected results.



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Chapter 4: Go Out and About



Remember when going for a drive was a favorite pastime? Our parents were eager to put a new car through its paces on the country's new highway system, into national parks, or just around their local community. Driving was recreation, freedom, and a source of pride. Bring back that nostalgia by going out for a drive; familiar sights and sounds bring back fond memories and provide a magical setting where conversations flow. If you can swing by a favorite spot or drive-through for old times' sake, that can make the excursion all the more special.

Tip: Go with it. Remember that preferences are important in guiding you in what works. Don't force an activity that is frustrating or isn't appreciated by someone with memory loss. Now if it isn't fun, it's probably not working, so move on to the next idea.

Senior living communities understand the importance of taking regular scenic drives. Residents look forward to these outings and return content and ready for a nap or dinner.

Make use of sunny days to go out and experience nice weather. Take a walk, smell the roses, and get some fresh air. Sometimes it's good just to sit a while, rest, and enjoy each other's company. Go where there's a view of the water or stop by a local playground to watch children at play. More ideas for visiting include the local airport to see the planes, a construction site at a safe distance, and public gardens.

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Chapter 5: Make New Friends



Making new social connections is essential for a happy life regardless of age or ability. Actively seek out a variety of programs and groups that are in line with your loved one's interests and skills. Senior centers provide a place for elders to interact in a variety of activities. For those in need of a more secure setting, senior living communities have day stay programs that are invaluable.

Addressing memory loss is easier and more fun in groups. Interacting with others of similar ability is engaging for those who might otherwise withdraw. Good examples of group activities are gentle sports such as bowling, putting, swimming, and Wii video games. Puzzles and card games can also provide hours of intellectually stimulating entertainment with others in their generation. Conversations and laughter can easily flow in this environment, easing the challenges inherent with memory loss.

Help maintain favorite hobbies and pastimes. For example, handiwork such as rolling a skein of yarn, sorting fabric swatches, and gardening can be enjoyed with others. Engaging others socially can help keep activities physically and mentally active, and you'll be surprised how much fun it can be.

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CONCLUSION

This guide touches on five ways to have more fun while strengthening the pillars of cognition – memory reinforcement, social interaction, and new experiences. With these simple strategies, you can help rediscover the past and forge new memories that you both will cherish. Having fun is not only possible with cognitive challenges, but many find it essential to having a good day. Just remember to be flexible and willing to change direction whether that's during a planned activity or simply a conversation that takes its own course.

In our community, we rely on humor and fun to facilitate quality of life for our residents, and our team uses all of these concepts to develop our program. For example, our activity coordinator, Katie, (when she's not facilitating a fishing outing or a swimming group) regularly takes residents out to breakfast, enjoying a drive in the familiar neighborhood, listening to oldies on the radio, and frequenting a popular cafe with a good old-fashioned cup of coffee. These all make for a positive new memory with friends, full of laughter and using all Five Ways to Make Memory Care More Fun.

Weatherly Inn is locally owned, and it operates senior living whose mission is to preserve dignity and give respect to seniors and their families by providing exceptional quality in all aspects – from compassionate care, engaging activities, delicious food, to artistic surroundings and distinctive furnishings. We offer retirement, assisted living, and memory care at our community in North Tacoma, and we offer memory care at our community in Kent near Lake Meridian. The one-on-one relationships that are naturally developed and intentionally nurtured day-by-day between residents and staff are the foundation of what makes Weatherly Inn “...where it's home and you're family.”

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