

# Meaningfulness



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## What do you mean?

By Julie Cheney, RN

Think about meaningfulness in our lives. What is meaningful, purposeful, interesting in the things we do and the way we spend our time? What supports us to be focused, engaged, moving, functional and interested in the world around us? Is it leisure? That is, do we feel we are doing something meaningful when we are at leisure? Some of us might feel we are, when we pursue leisure activities that are helpful to others or produce something, like gardening, cooking, volunteering. Is it the same with watching a movie, clapping to music, singalongs or bingo?

The point is that activities are often arranged for people that are based in entertainment rather than in meaningfulness. After all, entertainment makes people happy – they smile and clap along. Yet, when we think about our days, most of the time as adults, are spent doing something and often it is meaningful activities that contribute to our daily lives. It's neither rocket science nor saving the world. Washing up, putting on the laundry, setting the table, mending a dropped seam, fixing a tap or watering the garden come to mind as just a few meaningful activities that many of us engage in every day.

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## Meaningfulness

# What is meaningful to you?

There are thousands of definitions of meaningfulness and all of them can be relevant to this discussion. Firstly, however, let's overlay the idea of something being meaningful to an older person. Their idea of what gives them meaning is based in their personal journey. It can be as diverse as a religious pursuit to folding napkins.

As we age we might find it harder to do some of the things that we were once responsible for, such as finishing a job from start to finish, or doing work that requires considerable strength or effort. Yet we can still function to support many activities around the home/living space or group that add to the whole picture of functions which maintain lifestyles.

Our instinct as care providers is to do everything for those we love or have responsibility for. We feel that we are showing love and respect for the older person's years of toil, their frail state. We want to make their lives easier, and, let's face it, sometimes we want our lives to be easier too. So, we say, "No, you just sit back and I will sort that for you.", or, "You don't have to worry about that anymore. I will do everything for you". When we are busy with family and work and maintaining a home, we think that sounds like a wonderful position to be in. For many people, however, taking away all functions becomes more of a disruption to a sense of their own value in the world.

Finding what a person finds meaningful can be as deep and complex or as simple as you wish to make it. Asking them whilst you are doing something is a start. Do they wish to do part of the task? Do they have a favourite thing they've always done, like folding the socks or freshening the flowers? Do they identify with an action such as collecting the mail or the morning paper?

"I would rather die a meaningful death than to live a meaningless life." Corazon Aquino




 Meaningfulness

## Ask yourself

How do you know what will be meaningful to another person? For a start, ask. How do you ask, you say? Well, simple questions when you are about to do something help people to realise they can make a decision about the activities going on around them. Also, being alert to the fact that every task has multiple small tasks within it which can be used to provide a meaningful contribution to the whole. This might be asking if they would like to do part of what you are doing, such as folding, hanging up something, setting the table, getting the breakfast items, watering the plant, brushing the dog. Take note of things that older people talk about, such as concern about the date, which could, for example, prompt the idea that it is their job to set up the calendar each day to remind everyone of the date.

Although we are talking more broadly about all older people with various levels of physical or cognitive ability, some further general principles about purposeful activities come from Dementia Australia. We have summarised them below and adapted them further on the following page.

- Don't set someone up to fail by expecting large and complex jobs to be completed.
- Focus on things that are already meaningful to the person where possible.
- Encourage new learning where possible.
- Make it an opportunity for enjoyment or social contact where possible.
- Promote self esteem in the activity and in your manner with the older person.

## At Later Years Support

We endeavor to provide useful, practical ways to support people in their later years, and their families. We utilise current evidence where possible, reputable health related sources and decades of experience with older people to guide our information. We offer suggestions that are general in nature and do not attempt to cover all needs of all people, or to be considered the only advice sought for a person's concerns. We recommend everyone seeks professional advice in any circumstance of complex health and wellbeing concerns.





# A checklist to give you hints

<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider all that has made the person unique; such as lifestyle, work history, culture, hobbies, travel, life events
<input type="checkbox"/>	Re-establishment of old roles or reinforcement of their area of responsibility, such as the person who sweeps the room, rakes the leaves.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Maintaining the relaxation and pleasure of activities: not too hard, too long, too tiring, too demanding that they cause stress or a sense of failure.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keep the task simple and unhurried so that it is achievable, one step at a time.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Set up the activity or space it is to occur within in a safe manner so the person can see and concentrate.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Adapt how things are done to make them achievable or able to be broken into parts, such as simple tools, alternate processes to enable achievement.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Minimise additional stress, e.g. noise, rushing, many instructions, crowded areas, times of the day that are harder to manage.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use emotionally stimulating and satisfying tools such as music or pictures, books and magazines in audible form if necessary, to stimulate reminiscence and engagement.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keep the senses and body engaged: walks outside, visiting active places, rummage through boxes to sort of reminisce about.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Be consistent and encourage their responsibility for the task but also recognise that sometimes there are bad days and they are allowed days off too.

## IN SUMMARY

1. As adults we do many meaningful things that are not necessarily about entertainment.
2. Carers often take away meaningfulness thinking they are improving things for their loved one.
3. Simple tasks of everyday functions can help maintain a sense of meaning and purpose to a person's day.
4. Ask and encourage activities that are relevant to a person for skills, knowledge, capacity and achievement.
5. Break activities into parts to determine which is the achievable action to be undertaken.

Reference:

<https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/i-am-acarer-family-member-or-friend/>