

Surprising Ways to Tuck Creativity Into Your Daily Routine

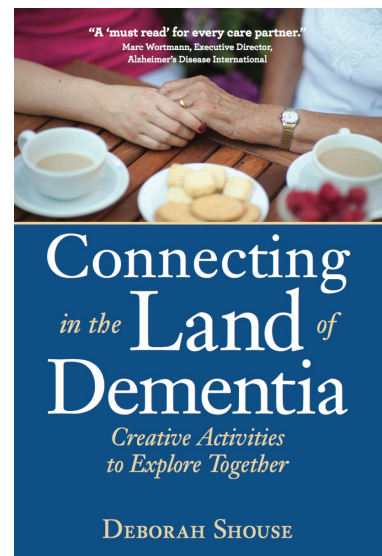
by Deborah Shouse

Only I, super daughter Deborah, could entice my mother to return to art projects she had loved before she was diagnosed with dementia. At least that's what I believed. But urging her to sit down and draw resulted in her simply folding her arms and glaring at me.

I wish I'd known then a better way to invite my mother into an art project. I wish I'd been able to celebrate her creativity without putting pressure on her. I wish I'd realized all the wonderful ways we could have connected.

Over the past three years, I've interviewed dozens of experts in creativity and dementia. My new book, ***Connecting in the Land of Dementia: Creative Activities to Explore Together***, features their tips for staying connected through expressive arts and imagination.

These activities benefit both family and professional care partners. According to Sarah Zoutewelle-Morris, author of *Chocolate Rain: 100 Ideas for a Creative Approach to Activities in Dementia Care*, participating in projects allows a mutual exchange: working or playing together lowers stress and can bring an increased sense of peace. Here is a sampling of ideas you can use:



Finding the Right Invitation

In South Dakota, Ari Albright, an artist in residence in a dementia unit, learned how to engage her residents in meaningful art projects.

“If I said, ‘Hey, want to make art?’ people shied away, saying, ‘I can’t draw, I can’t paint. I don’t know what to do,’” Ari says. But if Ari said, “Do you have a moment to help me?” or “Would you give me a hand?” people were interested in assisting. “It’s all about issuing the right kind of invitation,” Ari says. “Whenever possible, I offer two or three choices.” She then slows down and allows time for people to process. “Before you help, let the person tussle with the task a bit,” Ari suggests.

Reading Aloud to Spark Connections

At first, Gary Glazner thought everyone in the day room was asleep. The memory care residents were silently slumped in chairs and wheelchairs. But Gary, determined to share the verses he brought, began to read.

“I shot an arrow into the air,” he read. “And it came down, I know not where,” replied a man in a wheelchair. Even though his head was bowed and his eyes were closed, the familiar poem resonated with him.

Such experiences were the catalyst for Gary Glazner’s Alzheimer’s Poetry Project, a global outreach that encourages communicating through poetry. Gary, the author of *Dementia Arts*, travels the world, leading workshops.

“There are four steps to the process,” Gary explains. “First, a call and response, where I read a line of verse and the group echoes it. After a stanza or two, we discuss the poem. Next, we add props to the experience and finally, we create our own poem.”

Gary centers his poems on a theme, such as Summer, Birds, Trees, or Food, and enriches the gathering with objects that engage the senses. For example, to supplement summer-time creations, he might include a bucket of sand and a conch shell. He brings a misting spray to simulate an ocean breeze and invites people to smell suntan lotion. For refreshments, he suggests fresh strawberries, lemonade, popsicles, or homemade ice cream.

A study in the *American Journal of Physiology* documented the synchronization of heart rate and respiration during poetry recitation, showing the aerobic benefits of using the call and response technique in reciting poetry.

“Poetry goes beyond the autobiographical memory and offers care partners a way to communicate with someone who has memory loss,” Gary says.

Naming that Tune

“For people who have lost their ability to speak, make up a song, repeating their name, so they know it’s for them,” says Magdalena Schamberger, Chief Executive & Artistic Director, Hearts & Minds. “When you’re singing, stroke their arm in time to the song.”

Knowing When to Hold, Fold, and Adapt Them

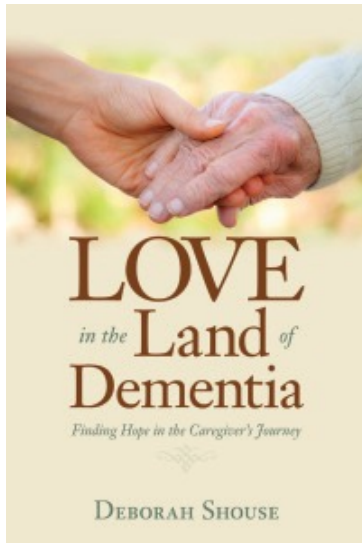
Nan often spent long hours with a well-worn deck of cards, playing solitaire. But when her confusion increased, her dexterity diminished, and her eyesight dimmed, she could no longer handle the deck and her daughter sadly put away the cards. Then her daughter bought a computer tablet with a touch screen. She showed Nan how to play solitaire by simply touching the desired card and moving it on the screen to the proper pile. Now they both enjoy huddling together and discussing strategies. The card game has become an important part of their weekly visit.

Creative Sparks to help launch an activity

- Choose a quiet space relatively free of distractions. Select a time of day when you and the person you’re caring for both have lively energy.
- Choose a project you’d both enjoy and ready your supplies.
- Issue the invitation.

- Allow the project to unfold at its own pace, offering support as necessary and encouragement along the way.
- If the project doesn't go as planned, don't worry. Go with the flow, praise the effort, and acknowledge the skill. Try again another day.

For some people, the spark comes through music; others are moved by storytelling, dance, movement, cooking, technology, art, or gardening. Incorporating meaningful creative activities into your daily life adds a sense of discovery and engagement to the day.



BIO

Deborah Shouse is a writer, speaker, editor, former family caregiver, and dementia advocate. Deborah and her partner Ron Zoglin raised more than \$80,000 for Alzheimer's programs by donating all proceeds from her initially self-published book, *Love in the Land of Dementia: Finding Hope in the Caregiver's Journey*, to dementia-based non-profits. Central Recovery Press has since published an updated version of *Love in the Land*. Deborah's latest book, *Connecting in the Land of Dementia: Creative Activities to Explore Together*, features dozens of experts in the field of creativity and dementia. These innovators share ideas that engage the creative spirit so you can continue to experience meaningful moments of connecting. To learn more, visit Deborah's [website](#).