

## **Meaningful Activity: What's The Point?**

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I had a huge crush on a boy in high school. For a long time, I didn't know his name, but I always looked for him in the hallway. As time went on, I learned his schedule and would just happen to be around when he was, hoping he'd notice me. My heart would pound and my face would begin to burn at just the sight of him. I was never brave enough to talk to him so nothing ever came of it. It was fun, though, and exciting. Something I looked forward to.

Saturday mornings are usually reserved for shopping and household errands that I have no time to do during the week. I get up early because I like to shop when the stores are less crowded. I have a certain sequence in which I do my errands, leaving the grocery shopping last. When I finish my errands, I clean my house. I get a great feeling of satisfaction when I've completed all my tasks.

There is a Victorian Museum near my home at which I host tea parties several times a year. As a member of the museum, I volunteer to cater these events because I enjoy the history and meeting new people, I love to bake, it's fun and I feel good about contributing to my community.

Meaningful activity isn't merely something to do. It involves so much more than simply deciding to do a particular thing. All of the things I've described to you are meaningful activities for me. These are the things that are exciting to me; the things I look forward to, the things I think about and plan for, the things that keep my life balanced and help me feel satisfied.

Every nursing home I have worked with has a program of activities that they say is meaningful. With few exceptions, every schedule has a variety of social programs that people attend regularly. In many cases, those who attend look forward to these activities and the socialization they offer.

What is lacking in all of these environments is true meaningfulness in terms of conceptualizing an intention to accomplish something, then planning your course of action and looking forward to carrying it out to your own satisfaction. In other words, there is more to activity than what I do in groups that are planned and executed by someone else. When we talk about empowerment and person-centered activities, we have to include these aspects of meaningfulness.

Many of the nursing home staff I've interviewed about quality of life are quick to point out that residents are given the opportunity, whenever possible, to express their lifestyle preferences, choosing routines, activities and foods that appeal to them. All too often, though, that autonomy is limited to the parameters established by the facility. If residents have no say in establishing the choices offered, being able to choose loses something.

It has been my experience that residents take greater pride and interest in their community when they are given the chance to help cultivate that community and establish relationships with those they share the community with. Involving residents in the planning of their routines is the first step in creating a quality environment.

So, how do you make activity meaningful for every individual? Begin by looking at the big picture. Scrutinize your activity calendar and ask yourself how many of those programs you'd truly look forward to and why? How much say are residents given in planning the activity schedule and the content of these programs?

Next, consider the alternatives to these groups. If I am not a joiner and I don't want to spend my day doing those things you typically see on an activity assessment – reading, TV, music – what is there for me to do? I think this is where we are most challenged.

How do you meet the definition of meaningful for the individual? I think you have to start with yourself, as I've done here. Decide what is meaningful about the things you do each day and try to imagine how you would be fulfilled if you spent the rest of your days in the care and control of someone else.

Do you color? I see a lot of people who live in nursing homes coloring. If I were going to color, I would want more than one crayon to work with. Many of the people I see coloring are only given one or two colors to work with. Sometimes, they're given watercolor markers that are almost dry. That doesn't make for a very satisfying picture. Even your children would want more choices and a nicer finished product.

In this series, we will explore “meaningfulness” from the perspective of the person living in the institution. To begin this journey, each of us needs to spend time actually participating in some of the activities that are offered in nursing home dayrooms.

It's not enough to say you could tolerate playing bingo for dusting powder and bargain cologne, you have to be able to tolerate that dayroom environment, all the people you will have to share the experience with, and still find the program meaningful, interesting, and something that amounts to a satisfying conclusion.

I think this adventure will help you to develop a customer focus, the first step to realistically evaluating the lifestyle offered to the residents. Once you are in it, then we can begin to talk about innovation, creativity, and achieving a daily routine that is as meaningful and interesting as it can be for each person in his or her circumstance.

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