

# Balancing the Day Through Dining

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Maintaining a healthy life balance helps all human beings manage stress and optimize a positive sense of self and control. Anyone who has ever worked an 80 hour week, been without sleep for days on end, or been unemployed for an extended period of time is aware of the negative impact that an unbalanced life has on a person. Typically, changes in patterns of eating and drinking are early indicators of changing stress levels, physical health, mental health, and cognitive well-being. Over-indulging or under-consuming, changes in types of foods and drinks chosen, as well as increases or decreases in frequency of intake can be hallmarks of many significant issues with well-being and health. Depression and anxiety both impact appetite and desire for food and drink. At the same time, what we eat and drink, when we do it, and how much we take in all influence our stress levels, sleep patterns, and ability to effectively use our brains and bodies to live our lives well! So before we talk about meals and dining, let's talk a little about how we could, and possibly should be filling our day. The better we balance everything, the less we need to rely on "comfort" eating, "fast-food", "caffeine pick-me-ups", and other artificial means to "get through the day".

There are essentially four categories that describe a person's Use of Time to fill a 24 hour period. A balance among these activities has been shown to promote a sense of well being and reduce stress and distress. Recognizing the value of meals and healthy eating and hydration practices, quality of life will often increase and can be determined by a balance of activity in these four areas.

- **Work Time** involves activities, actions and interactions that make a person feel valued and appreciated for their skills and abilities. These are a person's work in the world and how they spend their time supervising or helping others. It includes completing jobs or tasks that are (or were) part of a job or volunteer role or chosen profession in someone's life.
- **Self-Care Time** involves activities, actions and interactions done to meet our own personal physical and environmental needs. These activities, for example, might include time spent bathing, dressing, going to the bathroom, shopping, planning, cooking or eating meals, managing our health needs, vitamins and medicines, doctor or dentist visits, managing finances or paying bills, and other personal chores such as house cleaning, laundry dishes, yard work that keep our personal health and fitness at our preferred level.
- **Leisure Time** involves activities, actions and interactions chosen just because we want to do them. They give us pleasure or joy! This use of time is spent on things we simply enjoy. They may be active or passive, solitary or involve a group of like-minded individuals. They often include spending time with others socializing, visiting, and might include singing, playing an instrument, games, puzzles, walking, exercising, dancing, gardening, crafts, art, music, photography, reading, and watching television or movies.
- **Restorative Time** involves activities, actions and interactions that re-energize us. These activities will serve a person by helping them to calm or center, rest, relax and feel better if there has been stress. These type of activities are typically quieter and will sooth and lead to personal peace. Sleeping, napping, praying or meditating, listening to music, holding hands, sitting with someone you like, quiet walks, rocking, watching birds or fish, petting a dog or cat, are examples of this use of time.

So how does eating and drinking figure into all of this? For many of us, food and drink can fit into several categories of time use, depending on the context and the environment. For many women, and some men, cooking, meal preparation, and meal provision is a work activity. We do it regularly, we receive praise and appreciation for providing something that others enjoy and it may be seen as our major contribution to the running of a family or organization. For others it is a way to nourish and hydrate ourselves so that we can do other activities we love and need to do. It is said that some people live to eat while others eat to live. When it comes to leisure activities and food, we associate celebrations and social, sporting, and faith-based events with special meals, foods, drinks, eating behaviors, or gathering cues. Finally, there are some food items and drinks that are used and can signal a change in alertness and arousal levels. Herbal teas, a cup of hot chocolate or warm milk, a bowl of ice cream, or a warm chocolate chip cookie many help a person wind down, settle in or feel right at home.

Over the course of dementia, how food and drink is viewed, used, and abused can and will vary. Even care partners can miss the changes in consumption and use of food and eating and drinking rituals and routines that may be driving some challenging situations and creating stress and distress. One of the challenges for care partners is to be aware and investigate what is still working and happening and what is changing and needs modification, so that meals, foods, drinks,

routines, and rituals are supportive and beneficial. Considering the importance and meaning of food and drink and their preparation, delivery, sensory presentation, and intake is a constant re-evaluation process as the PLWDs abilities and interests are changing. Making sure there is a mix of activities that will meet social, physical, mental, and spiritual needs for each individual is a complex and ever-changing task. Families and communities must work together to successfully create options and programs that work so that dining offers opportunities for feeling valued, finding joy, meeting needs, and restoring oneself when dementia is progressing.

Meal times are a great place to start when examining how you can make a difference in someone's day. It is one of the activities that all of us participate in throughout the day. When it comes to dining, there are some simple activities that not only help set the stage for meal times but also bring balance to the WHOLE person and the WHOLE dining experience.

#### **Before Meal Time:**

- Consider gathering for a social time with some fun, opportunities to sing-a-long or play some visually oriented brain teasers.
- Consider offering small servings of warm drinks, water (flavored and colored), or juice should be offered as folks come to the dining area.
- Hand care/cleaning (using foam, or washcloths in select cases) with lotion and hand hygiene checks can be offered.
- Have an individual or small group work on simple food preparations & getting drinks together.
- Each person should be offered drink and food - greet prior to serving (emphasis on making sure a person's mouth is moist (hydrated) before offering food item).

#### **During Meal Time:**

- Offer drinks (choice of 2 when possible.) Try to have only one on the table at a time, if making choices or busy eating surfaces creates more distress.
- Prepare plates for safe and independent consumption to the side and then serve once the individual has been seated, if the person requires help to get food into bite-sized pieces or condiment addition is provided by the care partner to avoid a sense of being treated like a child.
- Know preferences BUT provide choices and offer alternatives, so that the person gets to practice choosing.
- Serve meals in courses so there is less on the table top at a time, but keep it flowing, if the person has difficulty waiting for the next thing..
- People needing assistance are usually helped by having someone sit to their dominant side and provide the cueing or physical help as needed (using Positive Physical Approach and Hand Under Hand)

#### **After Meal Time:**

- At the end of the meal, provide a warm damp cloth to wipe their hands and faces prior to leaving the table.
- Encourage people to clean up dining area - move tables, wipe chair arms, sweep, wipe table tops.
- Go to living area, settle in, feet up - let food digest, offer newspapers, magazines, books.
- Music on - low and calm.

It is important to take into consideration the individual and the meaning and value of food and drink in a variety of contexts as it may relate to that person (social, spiritual, physical, physiological, sensory and emotional.) Do you know their personal history? What does meal time mean to them? Was it a time for family to gather and share or did they historically enjoy meals alone? Create an environment that is comfortable and inviting. No one likes to eat when stressed!

You will want to use the GEMS as a guide to help recognize where the person is in the change process and what care and environmental supports will optimize their function, promote participation and enjoyment, and minimize their risks of negative events and problematic situations. Take time to notice and address concerns and progress, provide the 'just right' amount and type of assistance. You can create an environment that maximizes the dining experience for people with dementia as the condition makes itself known. It's really all about finding moments of joy everywhere - even in dining.