



Shared Meals in Memory Care

*An 8-week program of
fun and conversation*



THE FAMILY DINNER PROJECT

Shared Meals in Memory Care



Research shows that improving mealtimes for people with dementia can improve nutrition, hydration, weight stability, and social connectedness. The more engaged a person with dementia can be during the eating experience, the more likely they are to increase their intake, which can also improve mood and emotional wellness.

This program is intended to help memory care staff work with patients and, wherever possible, their families to increase social engagement during mealtimes. The activities and conversation starters that follow were developed specifically for people with dementia and their caregivers, in consultation with memory care experts.

Over the course of the eight weeks outlined here, try to offer opportunities for residents to engage in the games and conversation starters during their structured mealtimes. If possible, include visitors in these interactions as well, and solicit their feedback about whether they feel the activities have improved the quality of their loved ones' physical, mental, or social state during meals.



Week One: Drawing Music



DINNER GAMES DRAWING MUSIC

- Give each person a piece of paper and some colored pencils or crayons.
- Play a piece of music — preferably one that everyone enjoys!
- Invite each person to draw along with the music, without lifting the crayon or pencil from the paper. The goal is to watch your own hands flow along with the music.
- When the music ends, stop drawing and share your creations. Notice how they're similar and how they're different!



Conversation Deepeners



- What does this music make you think about?
- Tell me your favorite thing about this picture.
- If you could choose the music next time, what would you choose?
- What feeling did you have when you listened to the music?



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Week Two: Different Drummers



DINNER GAMES DIFFERENT DRUMMERS

Pick one person to be the leader. The Leader begins tapping a beat on the table (or clapping). The others around the table begin tapping or clapping along with the Leader.

The Leader can change the beat whenever they choose, and everyone else must follow suit. Then, without warning, the Leader stops drumming. The last person to stop drumming is the new Leader.



Conversation Deepeners



- Did you prefer to be the leader or the follower?
- What words would you use to describe this game? Fun? Challenging? Stressful? Something else?
- What if we played a quiet version of this game? We could try to follow hand movements or faces instead. Should we try it?



Week Three: The Smell Test Game



DINNER GAMES BLINDFOLDED SMELL TEST

Set up small jars with cinnamon, lemon, toothpaste, banana, other spices in your kitchen, yogurt and/or whatever else you have on hand.

Blindfold your family members (or have them close their eyes and promise not to peek) and have them guess the ingredients!



Conversation Deepeners



- What does that smell make you think of?
- How would you describe that scent to someone who can't smell it?
- If you could use one of those ingredients in a recipe right now, which would you choose?
- Which scents would you like to smell again, or not?



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Week Four: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1



DINNER GAMES

5,4,3,2,1 ACTIVITY

Each family member takes turns naming:

- 5 things they can see
- 4 things they can touch
- 3 things they can hear
- 2 things they can smell
- 1 thing they can taste OR 1 thing they'd like to eat right now

For an extra boost of calm, try encouraging family members to take one slow, deep breath before sharing; speaking in a whisper; or sitting as still as possible while they share.



Conversation Deepeners



- Vary the activity by asking what the person would LIKE to see, touch, hear, smell, or taste if they could choose anything in the world.
- For less verbal people who struggle with answering, offer choices. “What are some things we see right now? Do you see anything pink, or anything beautiful? Show me.”



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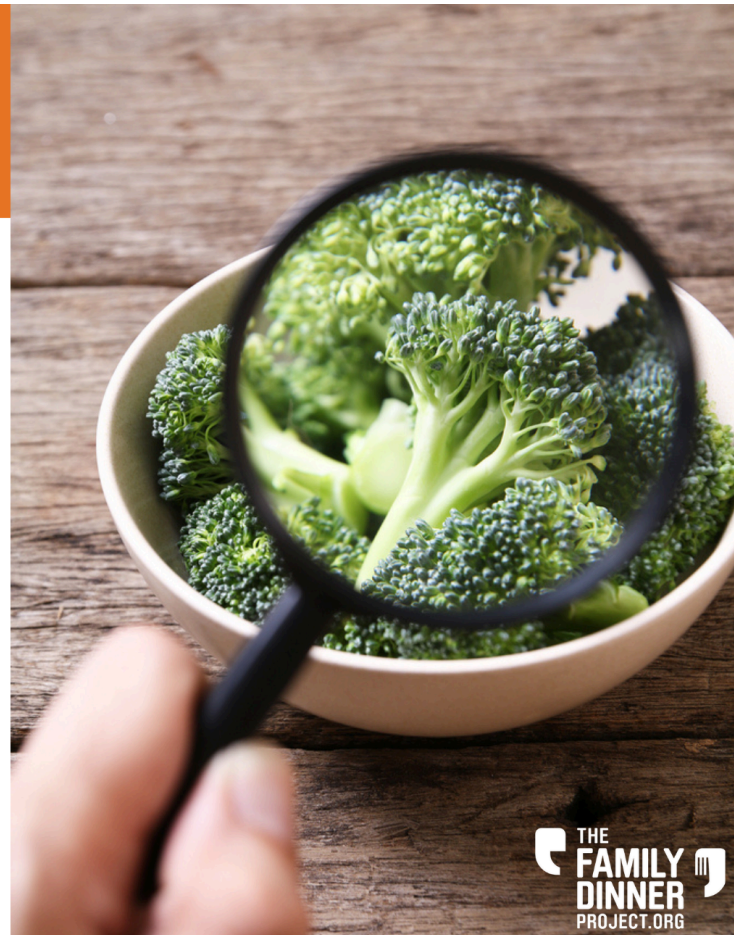
Week Five: Food Detective



DINNER GAMES

FOOD DETECTIVE

- Set up a “detective’s office” area. You’ll need a place to set out the food, plus lots of different “tools” your detective will use to help investigate.
- Ask your detective to investigate the food you’ve chosen and record their answers to the following questions (or any others you might think of!):
 - What color is the food?
 - How big is it, and/or how much does it weigh?
 - What does it feel like to touch this food? Is it smooth, rough, squishy, dry, wet...?
 - Does it have a smell? Can you describe it?
 - Try to push this food across the table to the other end. Measure how far it goes.
- Now add an extra challenge for your detective! Ask them to share their notes and findings with another family member who wasn’t present for the activity. Can the other person guess what food they were investigating just by reading the notes?



Conversation Deepeners



- Does this food look familiar to you, or is it new?
- Would you want to eat this food?
- If I shared your description of this food with a person who’s not here, do you think they could guess what food you were examining? Should we find out?



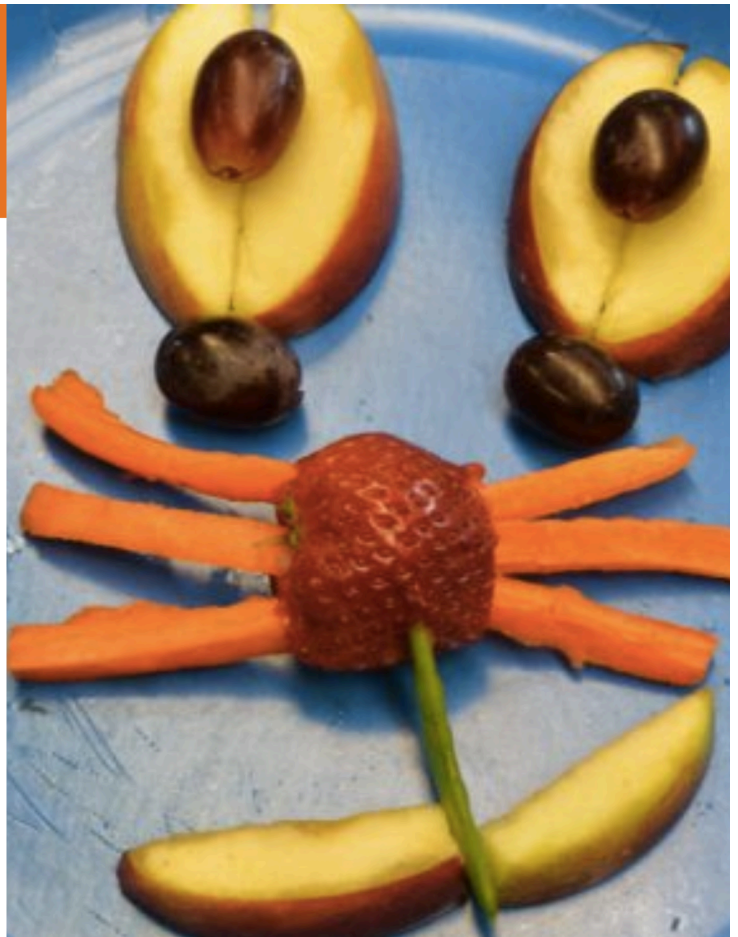
Week Six: Food Collages



DINNER GAMES FOOD COLLAGE

Research shows that when people play with their food they may be more apt to eat it.

Take the elements of a salad such as sliced red pepper, cucumbers, avocado, carrot sticks, lettuce leaves, cherry tomatoes, bean sprouts, and nuts and have each person make a face, a car, a plane, houses, or animals, out of these elements on a plate.



Conversation Deepeners



- What kind of pictures should we make with this food?
- If you could share this plate you're making with anyone in the world, who would you choose?
- Besides the way it looks, what are some words you would use to describe the taste, feel, or smell of your creation?



Week Seven: Dinner Playlists



DINNER GAMES

Favorite Playlists

Collect suggestions from the residents ahead of time to make a dinnertime playlist. You could ask for favorite songs, or make themed playlists, like songs about food or songs about nature.

Play the songs during mealtime and see how residents react when they hear their choices played! For extra fun, you could add a “dance party” element and have everyone at a table dance in their seats when a song contributed by someone sitting there is playing.



Conversation Deepeners



- What do you like about this song?
- Have you heard any other songs on this playlist that you particularly like? Any you don't like very much?
- If you could only listen to one piece of music for the rest of your life, what would you choose?



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Week Eight: Pass the Page



DINNER GAMES

Pass the Page

The goal of the game is to have each person add just one element to a shared drawing at a time. A good guideline is to think of not lifting your pencil from the paper — once you've lifted it, your turn is over.

Start with one person drawing a single element, like a shape or a line, on the paper. They then pass the paper to their right. The next person adds an element, and so on around the table. Keep going as many times as needed to create what you all agree seems like a finished drawing. You might be surprised what develops!



Conversation Deepeners



- How would you describe this drawing?
- What is your favorite part that was drawn by someone else?
- Are you surprised by how the drawing ended up? Did you have anything else in mind when we were working on it?
- If you could change one thing about this drawing, what would it be?



Bonus Activity: Shared Stories

Look at a photo together, such as the one provided below, and ask open-ended questions like:

- Where do you want to say this is?
- What do you want to name the people or animals in the photo?
- What are they doing?
- What are they feeling?
- What sounds are in the image? What smells?
- What is going on? What happens next?
- How would you like it to end?
- What shall we call our story?

The question asker can repeat the answers verbatim, echo and affirm each response, and write them down to create a story that can then be shared with the speaker.





Cut-Apart Conversations



Cut these slips apart and place them in jars or baskets on the table to facilitate conversation!

If you could fly, where do you think you might go?

Do you prefer daytime or nighttime?

If you could see anything outside your window, what would you like to see?

Chocolate or vanilla?

If you could close your eyes and be anywhere when you opened them, where would you hope to be?

Vegetables or fruits?



Cut-Apart Conversations



Cut these slips apart and place them in jars or baskets on the table to facilitate conversation!

How do you make a stranger feel welcome when they visit you?

What is your favorite smell?

If you could be any animal, what animal would you want to be?

Shoes or slippers?

If you could eat one food every day, what food would you choose?

What is your favorite color?



Cut-Apart Conversations



Cut these slips apart and place them in jars or baskets on the table to facilitate conversation!

Movies or music?

If you were an ice cream flavor, what flavor would you be?

Coffee or tea?

If you could paint this room any color you chose, what color would it be?

Sail on a boat or fly on a plane?

If you had a magic wand, what would you do with it?



Cut-Apart Conversations



Cut these slips apart and place them in jars or baskets on the table to facilitate conversation!

If you could talk to any animal, what animal would it be, and what would you ask it?

What is your favorite season and why?

Warm weather or cold weather?

If snow or rain fell in any flavor of your choice, what flavor would you choose?

What is the best vacation you could imagine?

Board games or card games?



Cut-Apart Conversations



Cut these slips apart and place them in jars or baskets on the table to facilitate conversation!

If you could spend a whole day with someone, who would you want it to be?

Art museum or history museum?

Describe your dream house.

Romance or mystery?

If you learned a new hobby or skill, what would you want to learn?

Sweet or spicy?