

HIGHGATE

SENIOR LIVING



Sensory Checklist for Memory Loss

If you're caring for a loved one with memory loss, you might have noticed that your loved one is more withdrawn, restless, or confrontational. Fortunately, there are ways to help create a calming environment that soothes and relaxes your loved one [without turning to medication](#).¹

Soothing with Senses

As memory loss progresses, your loved one may struggle to communicate what they need or have a hard time starting activities on their own. They might feel embarrassed, frustrated, or annoyed that they need help to do things they used to do on their own.

For instance, you might have noticed that your mom, who used to be super active and involved in the community, now sleeps more to pass the time. Or maybe your dad, who used to love having the grandkids over for dinner, is now easily overwhelmed in large groups.

[Research shows](#)² that sensory stimulation — anything that appeals to one of the five senses — can help your loved one feel more comfortable and relaxed, connect with the world around them, and improve overall mood, self-esteem, and well-being.

Using the Sensory Checklist

This Sensory Checklist for Memory Loss offers more than 25 sensory stimulation activities to help family caregivers support loved ones with memory loss who are:

- Withdrawn or isolated
- Restless or sleepless
- Confrontational or easily upset

Activities work best when they're tailored to your loved one's interests.

¹ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/alternative-treatments-in-memory-care>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5962307/>

Withdrawal and Isolation

As memory loss progresses, your loved one may find it more difficult to initiate a conversation or an activity themselves. Verbal communication becomes more of a struggle, and if your loved one is aware that they [cannot remember names](#)³ or details of recent conversations they have had, it might feel easier to withdraw from further conversation.

If you notice your loved one seems withdrawn, it might be because they feel isolated or bored or because they have lost some confidence. Sensory activities can encourage them to communicate and engage with the people around them as well as improve mood and overall sense of self-worth.

- ❑ Look at photos, keepsakes, or magazines. Pictures of family, friends, and important life events bring back memories and are an excellent way to reminisce.
- ❑ Create a sensory box — a box filled with knick-knacks, holiday photos, an old driver's license, favorite perfume, awards, mementos, and anything else dear to your loved one. Sit quietly with them, showing them the items one by one in an unhurried way. This can help your loved one feel connected to their past.
- ❑ Create [scent cards](#)⁴ or jars using spices to remind them of favorite foods or places, such as fresh-baked cookies or a pine forest near their childhood home. Smell is a powerful way to access memories.
- ❑ Play games such as “Guess the Smell.” Fill small, airtight containers with comforting scents, such as cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, vanilla, and peppermint. Substitute other smells that your loved one would associate with positive feelings.

³ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/what-to-say-when-a-loved-one-with-memory-loss-doesnt-recognize-you>

⁴ <http://alittlelearningfortwo.blogspot.com/2010/12/ten-scents-of-christmas-sensory-cards.html>

Restlessness or Wandering

As memory loss progresses, your loved one may have a harder time telling you what they want or need, such as a visit to the bathroom or a change in temperature.

Have you noticed that your loved one is [restless and fidgets a lot more than they used to](#)?⁶ Or maybe they're pacing the house and [wandering around at night](#)?⁷ Sensory stimulation activities not only keep your loved one's hands and mind occupied, but the right activities also provide meaning and purpose.

- ❑ Ask your loved one to help you fold soft towels or organize stacks of non-essential paperwork. Giving them an activity they can feel successful at can help them feel like they're contributing to the household.
- ❑ Place coins in a small glass or ceramic bowl. Ask your loved one to help you sort them. It encourages them to focus their attention on the sensory characteristics of each coin and may even give them a [sense of purpose](#)⁸ if you ask them to help you sort your loose change.
- ❑ Create a [sensory activity apron](#)⁹ with multiple textures and surfaces for tactile stimulation. It might include ribbons, buttons, snaps, yarn, zippers, ties, and fabrics with different textures to engage your loved one's minds and fingers.
- ❑ Get a box and put dozens of pieces of assorted fabrics inside. Try to get different colors and a variety of textures, such as lace, felt, silk, velvet, wool, and cotton. Encourage your loved one to touch, fold, and sort the fabrics.

6 <https://teepasnow.com/blog/all-flight-reactions-dont-look-the-same/>

7 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/understanding-sundowners-syndrome-dementia-after-sunset->

8 <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/3-purposeful-living-projects>

9 <http://www.hemmein.com/the-busy-hands-fidget-apron-pattern/>

- ❑ Plan a visit to your local botanical garden. The flower scents, sound of birds, and the fresh air all combined offer a pleasant experience and positive stimulation for the senses.
- ❑ Dig in the garden. Gardening provides a change of scene and will also ensure you both get some fresh air and exercise.
- ❑ Make a floral arrangement. It is simple, provides cognitive and sensory stimulation, can help preserve motor skills, and instills a sense of ownership, independence, and accomplishment.
- ❑ [Get crafty](#).¹⁰ Try simple craft activities, such as creating collages from magazines or knitting. Familiar tactile activities like drawing, painting, pottery, knitting, sewing, or other crafts can spark old memories. Even if your loved one can't participate in these hobbies anymore, doing things like touching paintbrushes, swirling watercolors, scribbling with drawing chalk, squeezing yarn, or playing with fabrics can evoke strong memories. Art projects can also encourage your loved one to express themselves and [create a sense of accomplishment and purpose](#).¹¹

Notes:

¹⁰ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/slideshow-8-fun-crafts-for-seniors-to-do-at-home>

¹¹ <https://teepasnow.com/blog/focusing-on-what-is-retained-not-lost/>

Sleeplessness

As dementia progresses, it may become more difficult for your loved one to calm the mind enough to get a good, restful sleep. Or they might not be getting enough physical activity to allow the body to naturally be at rest at night.

Have you noticed that your loved one tries to climb out of bed multiple times after laying down? Or maybe you go to check on your mom and notice she's lying awake and staring at the ceiling. Sensory stimulation activities prior to bedtime can help relax the mind and ensure a peaceful sleep, leaving your loved one recharged for the next day.

- ❑ Use this [Physical Activity Planner for Memory Loss](https://info.highgateseniorliving.com/physical-activity-planner-for-memory-loss-download)¹² to learn how to help increase your loved one's physical activity, which will help them sleep well later. It includes many sensory activities, such as walking outside and gardening.
- ❑ Hold special spa days at home. Do your loved one's hair and nails and offer facial masks. Touch can leave your loved one relaxed and with a sense of being worthy of being touched.
- ❑ Use relaxing aroma-therapy scents in a diffuser or in hand lotions and apply prior to bedtime.
- ❑ Play soothing music.
- ❑ Plan a walk or activity that gets your loved one moving prior to bedtime.
- ❑ Follow a bedtime routine.

¹² <https://info.highgateseniorliving.com/physical-activity-planner-for-memory-loss-download>

[illegible]

Confrontational Encounters

Because of the way memory loss affects the brain, your loved one may feel confused or distressed at times. While trying to make sense of what is happening, they might be more confrontational than you're used to. However, they're not trying to be difficult. They're simply trying to meet a need.

For example, outbursts often are expressions of anger or stress. Resistance to [daily activities](#)¹³ such as bathing, dressing, and eating is often a response to feeling out of control, rushed, afraid, or confused. Sensory stimulating activities can help calm and reassure your loved one as well as redirect their attention to something else.

- ❑ Massage hands and feet with an essential oil mixture or lotion. Massage can help calm agitation, ease the effects of isolation, and encourage feelings of worthiness and well-being.
- ❑ [Read a poem](#)¹⁴ or part of a book that has meaning to them. Even if your loved one doesn't understand what is read, the tone and rhythm of your voice may help them feel in safe hands.
- ❑ Take a walk or sit outdoors together if your loved one is feeling trapped.
- ❑ Play natural sounds, such as wind chimes, or recordings of ambient soundscapes, such as rainfall, wind blowing through trees, ocean waves, or soothing music, which may aid in calming, bring back positive memories, and generally add to their quality of life.
- ❑ Look at pictures or watch TV shows consisting of beautiful scenery, animals, or beautiful lights. It can be pleasing to view something you consider beautiful or memorable.

¹³ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/slideshow-what-are-activities-of-daily-living-anyway>

¹⁴ <https://teepasnow.com/blog/the-red-suitcase-a-care-partner-responds-with-poetry/>

- ❑ Invite pets to come for visits. Spending just a few minutes with a furry friend can [reduce stress and alleviate depression](#).¹⁵
- ❑ Place visual props, such as a small fish tank, a bird feeder at the window, a clock, fresh flowers, hanging mobiles, or lava and bubble lamps, in the bedroom.
- ❑ Play movies or slideshows featuring abstract, calming images, such as slowly animated shapes and colors, or scenes from nature along with relaxing music for a calming effect.
- ❑ Place [aromatherapy](#)¹⁶ essential oil diffusers around the house. Lavender and lemon balm can help reduce anxiety and agitation, peppermint can stimulate appetite, and bergamot can calm mood and fight depression.
- ❑ Speak gently and reassuringly. It may help your loved one to feel safe and secure.

Notes:

¹⁵ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/5-benefits-of-owning-a-pet-as-a-senior>

¹⁶ <https://blog.highgateseniorliving.com/what-is-holistic-health-care>

Stimulating the senses with sensory activities can enhance mood, increase socialization, improve cognitive function, and support many of the side effects that accompany dementia (like restlessness, sleeplessness, and frustration). Not only can sensory activities help support your loved one, but you also may find the quality of the time you spend with your love one improve.



This checklist is brought to you by Highgate Senior Living, an industry-leading assisted living and memory care provider offering a holistic approach to care. Pioneering change in the senior living industry, Highgate is committed to creating a unique and desirable living option where each resident can live a life of purpose.

Visit our website at www.highgateseniorliving.com to learn more.

Highgate Senior Living. Each Day to the Fullest.

® Highgate Senior Living. All Rights Reserved.