

Reminiscence and life story work

For people with dementia, talking about stories of their past lives can help communication and improve relationships. Encouraging people to recall and share stories helps to reduce isolation, anxiety, apathy, anger and moderate depression.

This helpsheet describes reminiscence and life story work, outlines their value for people with dementia living in aged care and gives practical tips for care staff about how to do reminiscence and life story work.

What is reminiscence and life story work?

Reminiscence work, often called reminiscence therapy, draws on long term memory to enrich the present.

Life story work is a way of recalling and preserving memories by creating a record such as a book about an individual's life through childhood, adolescence, adulthood and late life.

The value of reminiscence and life story work

- Knowing something about a person's life experiences from past to the present, can help staff understand changes in behaviour. It can help staff understand causes of changes in behaviour and better respond to the person's needs.
- Reminiscence helps with assessing a person's current abilities and informs care plans.
- Reminiscence can help reduce feelings of boredom and isolation, providing opportunities for personal attention, conversation and social stimulation.
- Telling, hearing and acknowledging stories about a person's past can create a sense of pride in achievements and help preserve a sense of identity and self-worth.
- Reminiscence can remind a person with dementia how they coped in new and unfamiliar environments and situations in the past and this recollection may help them cope now and in the future.

Practical tips for doing reminiscence and life story work

Reminiscence and life story work can be undertaken with individuals, couples or small groups.

It requires empathy, skill in reading body language, time and patience.

Spontaneous reminiscence often occurs when an event, sight, sound, touch, taste or smell unexpectedly provides an opportunity for conversation about the past. This informal reminiscence arises unprompted, often when undertaking personal care tasks and if developed into a conversation can help the person feel valued and relaxed.

Planned group and individual reminiscence and life story work

Before beginning it is good to have a plan of what you would like to achieve for your group or individual reminiscence work. Know each person that will be participating and what you hope to achieve for that person. After each session think about what went well and what didn't. This information can be used to inform the next session.

Group work

- It is recommended that group work is shared with another staff member, volunteer or family member. Sessions twice a week are recommended up to a total of 10-12 sessions.
- Select participants you know will be interested, able to participate, and benefit from the sessions.
- Choose topics or themes that relate to known past occupations, interests and places where people have lived. Ask a relative or friend to provide some background information and possible prompts including photographs and personal memorabilia to be used in sessions.
- The size of groups varies but the same 4-6 people with two leaders is suggested. Open groups with changing participants are not recommended. Groups take time to grow and develop trust and confidence.
- Before the first group meeting, talk with each potential member to explain what will happen in the sessions. Give them a choice about joining. Some people may be unable to verbally consent, but this will be demonstrated by their willingness to attend and remain in sessions.
- Pace the length of sessions to match people's mood, interest and energy levels
- Decide if sessions follow a chronological order from childhood onwards or themes such as family, school days, work, food & cooking, holidays, weddings, cars, sports, hobbies etc.
- Collect ordinary, everyday objects to provide stimulation of different kinds. Present objects one at a time. The Internet is a rich resource of material.
- Reminiscence is improved when linked with various creative activities, especially music, dance and simple drama. Recalled memories can be recorded or documented in life books, scrap books, drawings, poems, stories, oral or video recordings, or other formats.
- Make sure everyone gets a chance to participate. Aim for the group to feel like a gathering of friends, sharing memories and yarnning together. Try to serve informal 'special' refreshments which help to make a friendly atmosphere.
- Don't worry about the factual accuracy or truthfulness of what is told. Don't challenge or correct. Memories subtly change with each recall. Respond to the underlying emotions being expressed because memories always come with emotions that need to be recognized and acknowledged.

Care Staff Helpsheet

Life story work

There is no set way of doing life story work. It usually involves a series of sessions with an individual that results in compiling a 'book' either using an existing template, perhaps from the internet or a loose-leaf binder where information is gathered from conversations and arranged either chronologically or thematically.

If possible, write down what is said in the person's own words, include copies of photographs, certificates, documents, newspaper clippings and other memorabilia that can be inserted in plastic pockets. Oral or video recordings may be made instead of a book.

The process of working together is as important as the 'book' which serves as a life history, that can be used as a focus for future conversations and care planning.

The book can provide useful information should the person be transferred to another care home, and can be a legacy for family members. Issues of consent, access and ownership of the book all require careful consideration.

Summary sheets, storyboards and portable laminated summary cards containing information from the life story work can also be used to provide key background information of the person with dementia for new, temporary or casual staff as a simple tool for encouraging conversation.



Managing negative life experiences in reminiscence

Although reminiscence is usually enjoyed and appreciated, it does not suit everyone. It should never be imposed on anyone who is reluctant to talk about the past. Be sensitive to people who need to forget rather than to remember. Not all reminiscences will be happy. Past pain as well as past pleasure, past loss and past joys, will be remembered because nobody's life consists only of 'the good old days'.



Resources

Gibson, F. (2011) *Reminiscence and Life Story Work: A Practice Guide* (4th ed.). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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