

Top tips on sharing memories with people living with dementia

Reminiscence is a word used quite commonly in activities work with older people, usually as a separate session in an activity programme. Yet the reality is that reminiscing is an integral part of everyday human interaction, and ideally should be built into many different activities.

Many of the things we do, see or hear remind us of people or situations from our past. A photograph, a song on the radio or doing a task which is familiar to us like hanging out the washing or walking a dog, can all prompt memories.



Focusing on strengths

Sometimes work with people living with dementia can focus too much on deteriorating abilities and problems. Reminiscing builds on an individual's strengths, particularly as long-term memories are often better preserved through the progression of dementia. Talking about memories and the people, places and events that matter to a person can be a magical escape from the stresses and difficulties of the present for both the storyteller and the listener. Many older people with dementia find themselves on the receiving end of others doing things for them. When a person remembers something and another person shows interest and enjoyment, it is a wonderful opportunity to become a giver again.

Listening to stories

We all have important stories to tell about our lives. For a person living with dementia, some of the recollections, images and fragments from a long life might sometimes appear muddled and hard to follow. There might be a need to repeat the same story again and again. There may be moments when the past appears to merge with the present and the chronology and generations become confused. The experienced listener is like a good sailor, able to hold course, move in tune with the changing winds and even when it is hard, keep giving the message, "You matter" and "I want to listen."

Not just happy memories

Whilst for many people reminiscing about the past is an enjoyable activity, it is very important to remember that it is not for everybody. There are many different reasons why people do not want to talk about their past or aspects of their past, and this must be respected. Individual assessment and knowledge of each person will be very important. Reminiscence may also include painful memories or in contrast reminders of a time which was much happier, which might sharpen a person's awareness of their current loss and difficulty. The expression of sadness or complex emotions is not necessarily a bad thing of course, but team members need to have the skill to respond sensitively to these feelings.

Top tips on sharing memories with people living with dementia (continued).



Some Do's and Don'ts to Consider

DO listen carefully to what a person is saying and show you are interested. This seems obvious, but it is surprisingly rare for people with dementia to really enjoy focused one-to-one attention for longer than a few minutes at a time, particularly in a busy residential care setting

DO take notice of stores, which are repeated constantly. Although it might be hard for the listener hearing something for the tenth – or even the hundredth – time, it is possible there is an important message behind what the person is saying. Are they trying to express something important about their identity? Is the person referring back to a time when they were competent and busy and valued for what they did? Think about repeating things back to the person, so that they know it has been heard and retained by you.

DO ask extra questions and show interest in detail, as this provides the person with an opportunity to 'dig deeper' into their memory and possibly discover a previously neglected ingredient of a familiar story.

Questions like "What was the weather like on that day?" "What was the colour of your dress?" might open up the story in a different direction.

DO use props to prompt memories – objects, pictures, music and dance can all help 'take people back and remember more easily.

DO pick up on the non-verbal messages that a person may give as to how they are feeling about the experience of remembering. Some people will become very animated in their facial expressions or hands, others might appear quite thoughtful and intense, a feeling often reflected in their eyes and heavier, slower body language. These give important messages to the listener about the emotions behind the memories.

DO endeavour to be inclusive of diversity when planning reminiscence groups. An example might be ensuring you have done some homework about what the different experiences of childhood and school might be for a participant who was brought up in Barbados or China. You may need to talk to someone's

relatives or reach out to colleagues from a similar cultural background to find out more. If you are working with younger people with dementia, be aware that the appropriate memory triggers might be very different for a 50-year-old than for a 90-year-old, for example in relation to music. Be aware that if you are running a session on memories of courtship, marriage and children, this might be difficult for someone who has never been married, not been able to have children or who is lesbian or gay. You might want to widen the topic to 'memories of love and friendship.' If you are exploring Christmas memories, be sensitive to whether people are from a Christian background, or whether their experience of Christmas is entirely secular.

DO consider inter-generational opportunities for reminiscence. Bring children and older people together to look at a particular topic or possibly to do a piece of creative work together, for example a simple piece of theatre based on people's memories.

Top tips on sharing memories with people living with dementia (continued).

DO be aware of each person's level of visual and hearing ability and the way in which the environment is helping or hindering her or him to participate. The acoustics in a room and the way in which the chairs and tables are arranged may make a big difference. A person with a hearing or visual impairment may well benefit from someone sitting next to them in a group situation to repeat things or explain the object or picture being looked at, or to give it to them to explore through touch. Several people talking all at once is not going to help anyone's ability to follow what is going on, and so the group leader may sometimes need to be quite assertive about ensuring that one person is talking at a time, when everyone is in the main group.

DON'T put people on the spot with very specific and direct questions. "Do you remember?" could be a very challenging question for a person with memory loss. "How many children did you have?" might seem like a very easy question but could be very upsetting for a person who is no longer able to remember the answer. There is nothing worse than a reminiscence group that involves a whole list of questions, which can feel more like an interrogation or a school test than a relaxed and enjoyable experience.

DON'T be too quick to correct factual inaccuracies. This is something to watch when including family members, who are aware of the "true version" of events and may be keen for the person to "get it right." We all have ways of re-writing our

personal life stories – in small or large ways – and sometimes it is important to just accept and respect the adapted version of the story as being real and important for that person in the here and now.

DON'T assume that you must be able to communicate with words to enjoy reminiscing. A person with dementia can respond non-verbally to an object or a song, which relates to his or her past or enjoy listening to others reminiscing and participate through 'talking' with their eyes and gestures, which are every bit as expressive and valid as words.

meaningful care matters

Free to be me

At Meaningful Care Matters (MCM), our international culture change work implementing the Butterfly Approach® in care homes, hospitals and day services places a strong emphasis on team members also sharing their own stories and life experiences with the people they support.

Reminiscing should not be seen as something that is 'done FOR' people living with dementia, but more something that we all do together as part of creating a sense of friends and family.

Our MCM core message is about being 'free to be me' and part of enjoying this freedom is knowing that our unique identity and story is valued and shared with others.

Sally Knocker

Meaningful Care Matters

For more information, please contact admin@meaningfulcarematters.com

www.meaningfulcarematters.com

