



Reminiscence

'Reminiscence' is a word used quite commonly in work with older people, and is often included as a separate session in an activity programme. Yet the reality is that reminiscing is actually an integral part of everyday human interaction, and ideally should be built into many different activities. Many of the things we do or see or hear remind us of people or situations from our past. A photograph, a song on the radio, doing a task which is familiar to us like hanging out the washing or walking a dog, can all prompt reminiscence.

So much of work with people with dementia can be about focusing on deteriorating abilities and problems. Reminiscing builds on an individual's strengths, particularly as long term memories are often much better preserved through the progression of dementia. Talking about past 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 with dementia remembers something and another person shows interest and enjoyment, it is a wonderful opportunity to become a giver again.

We all have important stories to tell about our lives. For a person with dementia, some of the recollections, images and fragments from a long life might sometimes appear muddled and hard to follow. There may be a need to keep repeating the same story again and again. There may be moments when the past appears to merge with 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.**"

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 possibly 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 care workers need to have the skill to respond sensitively to these feelings.

There are some obvious 'dos' and 'don'ts' when reminiscing with people who have dementia, which should be considered carefully before embarking on any planned reminiscence sessions.

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 day or residential care setting.

DO take notice of stories, which are repeated constantly - although it might be boring 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 that it has been heard and retained by you.

DO ask extra questions and show great interest in details, 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!

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

DO pick up 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.

DO endeavour to be inclusive of diversity when planning a reminiscence session.

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 make contact with colleagues from a similar cultural background.

If you are working with younger people with dementia, be aware that the appropriate triggers might be very different for a 50-year-old than for a 90-year-old. The Beatles might be a better choice of music than Vera Lynn for example!

Be aware that if you are running a session on memories of 'courtship, marriage and children', this might be more difficult for someone who has never been married, has been unable to have children or who is a lesbian or gay person. You might want to widen the topic to 'memories of love and friendship.'

If you are exploring memories of Christmas, be sensitive to whether or not people are from a Christian background, or whether their experience of 'Christmas' is entirely secular.

DO consider inter-generational opportunities for reminiscence - bringing children and older people together to look at a particular topic or possibly to do a piece of work together, for example a simple piece of theatre based on the older people's memories, might be a very positive experience for young and old.

DO be aware of each person's level of visual and hearing ability and the way in which the environment is helping or hindering him or her 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 to help to repeat things or to explain the object or picture which is 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 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...?" can actually be a very challenging question for a person with memory loss.

“How many children did you have?” This might seem like a very easy question, but it can be very upsetting and humiliating for a person who is no longer able to remember the answer. There is nothing worse than a reminiscence session that involves a whole list of questions, which can feel more like an interrogation than a relaxed and enjoyable experience!

DON'T be too quick to correct factual inaccuracies. This is something to watch when working with relatives and carers in particular, who are aware of the 'true version' of events and are 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 have to 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 her or his 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.

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