

# Preserving memories: using reminiscence techniques

Accessing and talking about memories in the form of reminiscence activities and therapies is becoming increasingly popular within care home settings with older people. Sharing memories with other people can aid communication and increase self-esteem (Moos and Bjorn, 2006).

This article will explore the different ways that care staff can help residents to preserve and facilitate memories by using person-centered methods.

When people moved into care homes decades ago they tended to leave a household full of items behind, many of which held memories of past events and significant people in their lives. Today's care home ethos encourages new residents to bring some personal items into the home, including ornaments, pictures and furniture. As well as helping to make the resident's room feel homely, this has many other purposes, including:

- It provides a familiar environment to the resident that helps with the process of transition
- It helps with orientation, as individual rooms within a care home can look alike and therefore be confusing, particularly to new residents who are unable to read names, often in small print, on a door
- It provides an unstructured tool to enable reminiscence.

## What is reminiscence?

There are many interpretations of the term 'reminiscence'. Butler (1963) describes reminiscence as the act or process of recalling the past. Reminiscence also involves the recalling of facts, especially events, which is enhanced by the experiences surrounding those facts, and is relayed to others.

A key phrase often used is 'I remember when': we all reminisce from time to time, recalling and reviewing events and our emotions at that time. Reflection is part of a

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**Reflecting on the past and sharing memories with others is an excellent way of facilitating communication.**

**Julie Swann discusses the application of some reminiscence techniques and their positive effects on wellbeing.**

person's development and part of growing older, and reminiscence is the sharing and validation of that reflection. It is this sharing and validation process that makes reminiscence so valuable, as it increases and maintains communication levels and abilities, and maintains and improves the individual's feelings of self-worth. Care staff can increase the sense of 'personhood' experienced by the older person by providing opportunities to talk about the past, and also by being a good listener.

## Application within a care home

Everyone reminisces, often many times a day at any time; either in private (*Image 1*), shared with another person, or in a group. In a care environment it can be informal and unstructured or a structured and more formal activity that is designed to stimulate mental faculties, encourage social interaction with others and, ultimately, improve wellbeing.

Formal reminiscence activities are usually planned around a theme and carried out in a structured manner using specific items and music to help the reminiscence process. Residents may discuss the pieces used and share their memories of the time associated with them. Activities can be carried out in the home or may be part of a day out.

Museums may contain rooms that are laid out as in yesteryear, which can get residents talking. There are two outdoor museums in the UK that are worth visiting, or viewing on the internet if they are too far from your care home (*Further information*).

## Triggering reminiscence

Anything can trigger reminiscence: visual items such as pictures and films are commonly used. However, other senses such as hearing (for example, music, voices and sounds), touch (fabrics and textures) or smell (cooking smells and perfume) can be equally effective, and often even more so. Even taste may be used, though obviously some discretion is necessary on the part of the staff. On many occasions, it is a combination of senses that triggers off reminiscence.

## Person-centred activity

Reminiscence should be based on a person-centred philosophy which puts the individual at the heart of an activity. It is important to remember that any part of an activity can be meaningful to the participant. It can be very easy to block a person recounting a reflection or memory just at the point where reminiscence begins, by, for example, paying too much attention to a schedule or other pre-planned activity. Interrupting, or not allowing a person time to communicate their memory and its meaning can be damaging to the very self-worth and wellbeing that reminiscence creates, and may hinder future efforts in this direction. It is vital, therefore, that any structured reminiscence activity includes time for recall to work (it may not be instantaneous), as well as time to 'wind down' after such a session. The content of the session must, therefore, be flexible to allow for wandering off the subject, as in daily conversation.

## Evoking negative emotions

When memories come flooding back they can be stimulating and enjoyable. Care staff should be aware that recalling and recording



Image 1. Reminiscing in private

memories can, however, bring back strong, negative and hidden emotions. Heathcote (2007a) describes some methods that care staff can use if residents become upset, suggesting that staff should stop the activity and offer comfort, and 'acknowledge, rather than change, the subject'.

### Activities to use

There are hundreds of resources available for care staff to use to find out more about reminiscence. Many articles and books have been written on the subject.

Most libraries will stock some books on reminiscence or will be able to obtain them. They may also be able to provide useful factsheets for care staff to use (*Further information*). Libraries often have reminiscence collections for loan at a small fee or free of charge and are a cost-effective option for care homes. Collections contain historical items relevant to certain periods, for example, World War II and the 1940s and 50s. Collections contain individual items or boxes of historical material, such as books, audio tapes, posters, photographs, postcards, objects, printed or recorded music. A care home or care home group may wish to have their own collections. Examples of items which can be used are described in Heathcote (2007b). There are also many helpful websites on the subject

(*Further information*).

### Useful tools

Precious objects and everyday items that stimulate memories can be used for reminiscence. To encourage conversation and reminiscence, various individual memories can be collected. As well as using photographs, possible ideas that care staff can use either with a group or an individual basis include photographs, memory boards, scrapbooks and life albums. These are described below:

#### Photographs

An old photo can be digitally re-touched and repaired. Photos can also be enlarged or reduced using a photocopier or a scanner, and so can be reproduced and used without fear of damaging the original. Digital photo-frames can also be used, which can display images in a 'slide-show' format.

#### Memory boards

Large memo boards criss-crossed with ribbon provide storage for notes, photos, cards, memos and lightweight objects. Magnetic memo boards are also available. Both these types of boards do not use pins so they avoid damaging precious documents and the risk of injury. Boards are available that have half the board made in this way and the other half as an ordinary pin board for appointment cards, important phone numbers and activity timetables. An example of a memory board is shown in *Image 2*.

#### Photomontage

A collage of photographs interspersed with

other flat items can be used to help recollections of personal life. They can also be used to mark specific celebrations such as anniversaries and birthdays. Important photographs can be kept away from the light and preserved while photocopies can be used or even arranged and copied in a larger A4 or A3 frame, thus preserving the original photographs. Several companies offer this service, but they may be expensive.

Some residents may already have such photos in their possession but do not wish to display them, as it may remind them of loved ones who have passed away. It is important for staff to explore a resident's feelings, as some residents may not want to look back at certain past events.

#### Memory or keepsake boxes

Memory or keepsake boxes come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from simple cardboard boxes that store items, to elaborate specially designed wooden boxes, even metal lockable boxes. Any small items can be stored, including jewellery, tickets or cards. These collections may be added to at any time with items collected on holidays or walks. Using boxes can protect keepsakes from damage by sunlight, dust, damp and pests. Ready-made memory boxes are available from commercial outlets. One reminiscence activity which may be found especially helpful is the process of going through the items every so often (but not too often) with the aim, not only of reminiscing, but also deciding which items to keep. If storage space is limited, this ensures that only truly valued objects are retained. It is vital, however, that final decisions on these items are left to the resident.

Table 1.

#### CREATING MEMORIES IN A BOX FRAME

##### Stage 1

Cover the backboard of the box with fabric, felt or decorative paper that contrasts with the items to be held within the box. Use a spray adhesive or staple gun at the rear.

##### Stage 2

Arrange the items in the box with the darkest and heaviest items at the bottom.

##### Stage 3

Decide how to fix the items on. A frame maker can attach these so that if items are removed no damage is done to the back of item. To create a 3D effect, the items can be mounted on small blocks of wood or foam pieces. Strong adhesive (or double-sided adhesive tape) will be needed to attach wood or items to the board. Foam can be pinned and hot-glue used. Start from the lower (underneath layer) and work outwards.





Image 2. Personal items which hold significant memories can be displayed to aid reminiscence

### Scrapbooks and life albums

These can be purchased very cheaply, for example, from 'pound shops' or stationers. Photograph albums can also be used, as they provide space for written and visual memories. Scrapbooks can include written accounts, as well as, for example, postcards and photos. Written entries should be in pen to avoid fading. Notebooks can also be used, and the covers covered with a hard plastic film to protect them.

It is becoming commonplace to have books that record special celebrations such as 16th, 18th, and 21st birthdays, weddings and anniversaries. A life album is a collection of selected memorabilia, photographs, and archival and other material that describes an individual's life in a photograph book format (Guse, 2000). The cover can have a collage of memories. Residents can be encouraged to write about:

- The images in the scrap book such as pictures, cards, letters, or poems.
- Recipes that they enjoyed.
- Memorable events
- Treasures that hold special meaning.

### Box frames /shadow boards

Most shops that make picture frames will make a glass-framed box to size that can be used to hold precious items. Memory boxes can be made with the residents over a period of a few sessions. 2D images can be scanned in and enlarged, for example, birth and wedding announcements, cuttings from newspapers, cinema and theatre tickets. Memory boxes can reflect specific periods of a resident's life: where they were born, places they lived in, occupations, hobbies or

memberships of clubs ; the list is endless.

### Life skill centres

Some homes have life skill centres that residents can use unaided. Many of these are based around activities that residents may have previously carried out, and encourage residents to actively engage in their surroundings. These include a desk with a typewriter, workbench, sink with cups nearby, raised plant beds with a trowel and watering can, a wash-basket full of clothes for folding, unfinished knitting, a dresser full of tea-towels and tablecloths and a coat-stand full of hats, coats, scarves and umbrellas.

### Conclusion

Anything can trigger reminiscence, as it can be evoked by any or many of the senses or a thought or conversation. However, although reminiscence is very popular, it should be remembered that many people do not like looking back but prefer to enjoy the present and look forward. Some residents may not welcome being surrounded by memories of what their life used to be, and may want to have new items and images that reflect what their family and friends are doing now and, indeed, currently look like. This is particularly useful for residents who have dementia.

It is important, therefore, to strike a balance of the old and the new. The past, after all, is as much about what happened yesterday as it is about what happened forty years ago. **NRC**

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### KEY POINTS

- Memories can be triggered in many ways using several senses
- Preserving memories can be an activity carried out on an individual or a group basis
- Box frames can be used to store personal items in a creative way
- Not everyone will want to reminisce, and this should be respected and noted
- Negative can also memories can be unearthed and staff should deal with these in a sensitive manner

### Further information

#### Making the best use of memory boxes

<http://pscm.northumberland.gov.uk/pls/portal92/docs/16638>

#### Outdoor museums which can be visited or viewed via the web

[Beamish in County Durham](#)

(tells the story of the people of North East England in 1825 and 1913

Website: [www.beamish.org.uk](http://www.beamish.org.uk)

[Blists Hill Victorian Town near Ironbridge in Shropshire](#)

Website: [http://www.ironbridge.org.uk/our\\_attractions/blists\\_hill\\_victorian\\_town/](http://www.ironbridge.org.uk/our_attractions/blists_hill_victorian_town/)).

#### Some useful websites

The time capsule [www.thetimecapsule.org.uk](http://www.thetimecapsule.org.uk)

Provides an opportunity for all generations to share their memories on a communal website and contains many pictures of times gone by.

BBC archives [www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar)

Contains an archive of 47 000 stories and 15 000 images from the public about World War II