



the benevolent society

initiating change

# Reminiscing Handbook



**The Benevolent Society**

# Reminiscing handbook

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## **Reminiscing handbook introduction**

This handbook has been designed as a resource for carers, family and volunteers who interact with older people. The aim is to give some guidance on reminiscing and to highlight how reminiscing can be used when working with groups or one-on-one with older people. Reminiscing can be used within a structured group, one-on-one or can be used during everyday interactions and activities of daily living.

One researcher notes reminiscing activities undertaken are not task orientated, but aim to give stimulation, enjoyment and to foster a sense of achievement and self-worth (Armstrong and Wright, 2002, p19).

## **What is reminiscence therapy?**

Sometimes we remember because our memories have been triggered involuntarily by a favourite song or tune and sometimes we remember on purpose. Reminiscing gives us a pleasure and a sense of relatedness and connection with what has gone before (Coaten, 2001, p 19).

Reminiscence allows us to relive events from our past. It is a process which focuses on the personal way we experience and remember events, rather than on chronological or historical accuracy. When we reminisce we don't simply recall random events in a cold factual way. With reminiscing we are able to relive the experiences that are personal to us in a way that is vivid and engaging.

Reminiscing encourages older people to become actively involved in reliving and sharing their past with others. Although reminiscence involves recalling past events it encourages the elderly to communicate and interact with a listener in the present. Reminiscence groups can operate on different levels. Groups can be run with older people and with a range of competencies including those who are confused.

As a recreational activity reminiscence can provide occupational and leisure activities for older people. As a means of psychological support reminiscence is aimed at generating self-esteem and the expression of individual identity. Reminiscence can also be used as a therapeutic tool to aid the life review process.

Reminiscing kits can contain items from the past that will be of significance to the lives of elderly people. Interaction with objects from the past is an important way of stimulating responses and can provide a focus for the recollection of deeply embedded memories. As memories can be triggered by a variety of different senses people will respond to the objects differently. The use of objects as prompts for memories is especially useful when working with people who have dementia.

(St George Museum, 2004, pp2-3)

## **The benefits of reminiscing**

Someone with dementia may only give you a small piece of themselves – all there is, and enough, at that moment. That small piece is precious and may become a strand or thread woven into your life as well. The fragments may, like the creation of a mosaic, gradually be pieced together and something new is created (Coaten, 2001, p 21).

## **Outcomes for the older person: one-on-one**

When reminiscing celebrate the richness of life experience, allowing in the process and the voice of the person to be communicated, however it is expressed (Coaten, 2001, p19).

Involving an older person in reminiscing has many benefits for that person. Some of these benefits are:

- Increase the ability to communicate and practice self expression.
- Increase social interaction through the sharing of experiences.
- Increase feelings of belonging and togetherness.
- Emphasise the individual identity and unique experiences of each person.
- Allow the older people to take on a teaching role through the sharing of their experiences.
- Help people to come to terms with growing older.
- Encourage older people to regain interest in past hobbies and past times.
- Encourage creativity.
- Increase self worth and provide a sense of achievement.
- Reduce apathy and confusion, especially in confused or disorientated people.
- Alleviate depression.

(St George Museum, 2004, pp 4-5)

- Increasing life satisfaction.
- Improving self-care.
- Helping older people deal with crisis, losses and life transitions.

(Jones, 2003, p 27)

- Meeting psychological and emotional needs.

(Wareing, 2000, p 22)

- Involvement in a meaningful and pleasurable activity and positive interaction.

(Spencer and Joyce, 2000, p 20)

## **Outcomes for the older person in a group**

There are some unique outcomes for people who participate in reminiscing as part of a group. Some of these outcomes are:

- Increase awareness among group members of the uniqueness of each individual member and of the personal effectiveness and significant contribution of each participant
- Increase realisation that other group members may share similar problems and concerns
- Increase the sense of belonging and acceptance by the group

(Museum Victoria, 1995, pp 13-14 )

## **Benefits for the carer, family and volunteer**

Reminiscing not only benefits the older person but the carer, family member and volunteer who may be engaging the older person in the activity. Some of these benefits are:

- Gain knowledge and understanding about the older person's life, history and achievements
- Find links between the older person's past experience and present behaviour
- Assist the relationship between older people and their carers, as understanding more about a person can facilitate more meaningful contact
- Provide an opportunity to learn about the past

(St George Museum, 2004, p 5)

- A way of finding a connection with another person and sharing similar experiences and memories

## **It's all in the approach: Engaging older people**

- It is important to recognise that your view of someone else brings with it assumptions about that person.
- We are all seen by others in different ways.
- There are many ways you can view an older person e.g. as a mother, father, daughter, sister, brother, cousin, uncle, aunt, best friend, resident, patient, teacher, the person with difficult behaviours etc.
- The way you think about someone else can also be influenced by your experiences, sometimes this could be an experience that may not be related to that older person.
- You may find yourself relating easily to one person but not another for a reason that might not be immediately identifiable.
- It is important to look at the approach you take when engaging with an older person through reminiscing. Focusing on the person and their strengths and skills whilst being aware of your strengths and skills can make a reminiscing a richer experience.

## Tips on approaching reminiscing

When engaging in a reminiscing activity with an older person use the following approach:

- A person centred approach used with sensitivity, flexibility, awareness and personal warmth (Wareing, 2000, p22).
- A focus on positive interaction with emphasis on brief, high quality interactions. Focus on the remaining abilities of the person with dementia taking into account each individual's strengths, their past and present interests and difficulties (Spender and Joyce, 2000,p 18).
- It does not matter if the enjoyment is for a short time or fleeting as it is still of value to that person (Coaten, 2001, p20).
- Be aware of attempts to communicate as what we see as 'difficult behaviour' could simply be an attempt to communicate
- Be person focused and let the person talk about what is important to them.
- Give everyone the opportunity to interact:
  - In one study it was found older people who were able to talk about their experiences and feelings were most likely to be given opportunities for conversation.
  - This same study emphasised the need to focus on those who may have withdrawn completely as they may have given up altogether on communication.
- Spending time listening to a person with dementia says to them they are special and what they have to say is valuable.

(Surr, 2002, pp 24-25 )

- The use of humour as a means of communication can catch a person's attention and has the capacity to hold it. The humour of people with dementia is often very keen. Reminiscing with humour not only provides opportunities to enjoy it, but also gives permission to express it (Killick, 2003, pp 24-26).
- It is important to recognise the many factors that influence one's life. Growing up in a different country, living in regional areas or interstate all offer different experiences. Other influences on a person's life can be growing up as part of a large family, different cultures, customs and language (Museum Victoria, 1995, p 3).

## The five senses



Some older people may no longer have the ability to explain or express their thoughts through words. Reminiscing is much more than simply talking about a memory. Reminiscing can involve all the senses.

For people with cognitive impairment and difficulties in communicating verbally the opportunities offered by a different, non verbal, way of communicating may be of great importance (Coaten, 2001, p 21).

Providing sensory stimulation through sound, movement, dance, rhythm, beat, smell, changes in light and colour, objects, tactile surfaces, materials, vibration, food and experiencing flavour can provide vivid and strong reminiscence.

The persons ability to derive pleasure from the use of some or all of the five senses is an important strength. Many activities can involve some sort of sensory stimulation which helps to engage the person with advanced dementia in a pleasurable activity (Spencer and Joyce, 2000, p 18).

Activities mediated through visual and tactile modes can help the person with dementia in orientation, in feeling safe and in both stimulation and enjoyment (Armstrong and Wright, 2002, p 19).

## The importance of hearing and 'touch'

- Hearing is one of the last senses to go as an older person loses abilities, thus hearing is a major sense.
- Deterioration of other senses can result in touch being the one of the only non verbal types of communication that can be fully perceived.
- If elderly people are not touched they can lose touch with the environment. This can result in a loss of reality.
- An agitated older person will often relax when someone sits and holds their hand and talks to them.
- Touch conveys attitudes and feelings. Touch is something which cannot be faked. So... what is communicated if we do not touch?

(Boney, 1994, pp 26-27)

## **When reminiscing brings up difficult, sad or distressing emotions**

Not all memories are positive so it is important to 'check in' with the person throughout the reminiscing experience. Keep the following in mind:

- If an older person starts remembering a sad or difficult time in their life it is not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes it is OK for the person explore their feelings and for these feelings to be acknowledged.
- Often sad experiences will be recalled as part of reminiscence therapy. These experiences are just as important as happy ones, so don't feel that you need to steer discussion on to a happier topic unless it is clear that the person or group is becoming distressed. Sometimes reminiscence can lead to feelings of depression and may require one to one follow up (St George Museum, 2004, pp 6-7).
- Environments should be supportive and confrontations should be avoided. When painful emotions arise and the group has difficulty in dealing with it, the leader should intervene or advice should be sought from staff and family (Museum Victoria, 1995, p3).

## **Engaging a person in a reminiscing session**

### **Reminiscing one-on-one**

- It is important to gain the attention of the person you will be with during the reminiscing session:
  - Be physically at the same level with the older person.
  - Make eye contact if possible.
  - If eye contact is not possible be sure to have your hand or the reminiscing objects in a place the person will be able to see as this will help to make a connection.
  - If the person has a sight impairment let them know you are with them through touch, movement, talking or possibly move them to an area where there will be a difference in light.
- Always use a space where the person can feel comfortable, where there are minimal distractions and where you will not be interrupted.
- Use the following methods for an introduction:
  - Introduce yourself and possibly mention something the person has told you on a previous reminiscence or use an object they reacted well to previously.
  - Give the person a clear introduction to the reminiscing session and theme.
- Don't rush the person. Allow time for them to communicate in a way that they are comfortable with.



- Look for non verbal cues as they are often more subtle than verbal channels but probably more powerful. Look for the following:
  - Watch for facial expressions.
  - Is the person looking?
  - Is the person adding a gesture?
- If using objects from a reminiscing kit hand the person an object one at a time.
- Keep to the pace of the older person. Some people will keep interest in objects for a long time whilst others for only a short time.
- When closing the reminiscence make sure the activity has a formal ending and that the person knows the reminiscing is coming to an end (Armstrong and Wright, 2002, p18).
- Check that the older person is not left thinking about a sad or distressing memory. If someone is thinking about a sad or distressing memory keep the following in mind:
  - 'Walk' the person out of that memory onto another.
  - Acknowledge how the person is feeling, that their emotions are genuine.
  - Stay with the person a little longer if time permits.

(Armstrong and Wright, 2002, p18)

## **Tips for successful conversation**

Keep the following in mind for clear communication:

- Don't ask specific questions that are closed ask open ended questions as they often work better e.g.
  - 'How are you getting on?'
  - 'Please give me some advice on...' ( not suitable for people with advanced dementia).
- Building up a sense of trust is important. Be realistic and recognise that it may take a while to get to know the person.
- Allow the person with dementia to set the agenda. Let the topic of conversation flow under the older person's control wherever possible.
- Be a good listener. Listening means learning to stop, wait and allow the older person time to speak. What may seem like an uncomfortable, silent wait for us can allow the older person time to gather their thoughts and respond.

(Surr, 2002, p25)

## Reminiscing with Groups

When holding a group reminiscence keep the following in mind:

- Group numbers should be small. Let the following be a guide:
  - No more than 8 or 10 when working with older people who do not have dementia.
  - No more than 6 when involving older people who have early to moderate stages of dementia.
  - No more than 3 when working with older people who have advanced dementia.
- An appropriate group size allows objects to be circulated rapidly to stimulate discussion. The right group size allows people a good experience and ensures everyone gets a chance to speak or be involved.
- Session times may vary depending on the group. Let the following be a guide:
  - Up to 45 mins when working with a group of people who can reminisce and communicate well.
  - 20 to 30 mins with a group who may be in moderate stage of dementia.
  - Small pockets of time for people with advanced dementia.
- Quiet, intimate and comfortable surroundings are important in order to make people feel at ease.
- Placing seats close together helps promote an intimate atmosphere.
- Starting the session with a cup of tea or coffee and biscuit helps add to the sense of occasion.
- It is important not to use too many objects per session, as this can bombard participants with too much stimulus material.
- Select up to 6 objects that you feel are most appropriate for the group.
- As facilitator it is important to do as much listening and as little talking as possible. Occasionally you may need to offer cues or prompts about the material in order to keep the discussion flowing.
- It is important to ask open ended questions that require more than yes or no answers. Use your best judgement when working with people with advanced dementia as too much questioning can be inappropriate.
- Its is important to keep track of who has not spoken in the session. As a facilitator provide them with extra support and encouragement to join in, while always respecting the participants' right to privacy.
- Don't be concerned if the discussion leads to subjects beyond the theme of the session. One memory can trigger many others, and all are important in the reminiscence process.

(St George Museum, 2004, pp6-7)

## **Suggestions for group work**

Some extra tips for group reminiscing are:

- Use a room where the participants will feel comfortable and able to talk.
- Seating in semi circle allows for easy passing of objects and for participants to hear others.
- Men can be encouraged to discuss topics which have traditionally been considered as women's work.
- Use the opportunity to hear different versions of an event from different people but be careful not to offend or disregard anyone's personal experience.
- Use the differences within the group, such as age, to obtain greater insights into each object or experience.
- Introduce the topic and then gradually pass the items around.
- Allow plenty of time for discussion. Some people may need time to remember while others will speak up quickly and often.
- The groups need some structure however allow sufficient flexibility to accommodate spontaneity.

(Museum Victoria, 1995, p5)

## **The importance of objects**

Providing a focus for reminiscing can be best achieved through objects. The objects are usually collected within a theme and can be used as a structured activity to support reminiscing. Objects can also be left with an older person for them to sort through and engage with.

One researcher notes multi sensory triggers help compensate for different cognitive impairments and objects which can be touched, handled and passed around seem to be particularly important (Coaten, 2001, p20).

## **Reminiscing Kits**

Reminiscing kits are a great resource. When creating kits keep the following in mind:

- Older people should be familiar with most or all of the items in the kits.
- The objects need to be carefully selected so that they relate to specific ideas, events, occasions or periods of life.
- The objects need to be age and experience appropriate and safe for older people to use.
- Don't forget about kit maintenance by replacing all objects in the kits after use, cleaning some items if necessary.

Points 1 to 2 (Museum Victoria, 1995, p3)

## Creating a Kit

Follow these tips for creating a reminiscing kit:

- Ask the experts: talk with the older people about what is important to them and their past experiences.
- Start with a theme: centre your kit around a similar experience or activity
- Select an era: what year or vintage is appropriate for the older person
- Remember the senses
- Where to get resources: many items can be donate or found in second hand stores. Creating a kit does not have to be expensive.
- Make the container part of the theme and think about how it will be used. Will the kit sit in an older persons lap or simply be used for storage of items that can be passed around?
- Write a help sheet for the kit: leave some prompts for conversation or some notes on different people's memories in the kit. This will assist some one else to use the kit.

(Museum Victoria, 1995, p13)

## Other types of activities/ reminiscing materials

- Sensory rooms.
- Sensory stimulation, multi sensory environments.
- Soft toys, life-like dolls and toys.
- Sensory boxes.
- Cooking/ Art.
- Tactile boards / mats/ wall sculptures.

(Wareing, 2000, pp22-24)

## Other opportunities to reminisce

There are many ways to reminisce. Using objects is a powerful way of touching the senses and stimulating memories however using themes in conversation during everyday activities can also provide positive engagement with an older person.

One researcher notes it is about engaging older people throughout the day with positive interaction during routine care (Spencer and Joyce, 2000, p 20).

Every day activities to use reminiscence

- Meal times.
- Bed times.
- Bath/shower times.
- Morning/ afternoon tea and supper time.
- When assisting someone to walk to another area.
- When giving medication.

## Themes

Below are a number of themes you could use in conversation during daily tasks. These types of questions can be useful to build up a personal history 'life history' of the older person or as a way of allowing the person to express themselves.

I was born	Family life
My mother	Sundays
My father	Toys and treats
My brothers and sisters	Christmas day
Other relatives	Favourite food
First memories	Heroes
My childhood home	Radio, music
Favourite rooms, things	Turning 21
In the backyard	Cars
Our neighbours	The great depression
Our childhood games	During the war
Childhood pets	Child, other commitments
Our town	Love, marriage
Childhood disasters	Work
Childhood illness	Special friends
Childhood fears	Hurdles, heartbreaks
Childhood songs, street games	Regrets

(Thompson, year unknown)

(Coaten, 2001, p 19)

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