

## Running Reminiscence Activities in Care Settings



**Downsway supermarket, Gloucester 1971**  
[Gloucestershire Archives: Citizen 7.6.71]  
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## **What is Reminiscence?**

Reminiscence is an everyday activity carried out by everyone. This activity is very important for older people living in care situations or attending day centres and clubs. It allows participants to talk about their past and who they are now in a positive way.

Formal or informal reminiscence activity enables:

- care staff, volunteers and others better understand and know about the person they care for or have contact with.
- individuals who have memory loss to make sense of their life.

Some definitions and explanations:

- The act or process of recalling the past (Butler 1963)
- The process or practise of thinking and talking about the past
- Reminiscence can be experienced as a solitary activity a 1/1 activity or a group experience
- The process of reminiscing can happen spontaneously or as a planned activity
- Memories inspired by reminiscing can be transferred into writing, drama, sound, music, or other forms of verbal/non verbal communication
- Reminiscence can be an emotional experience for the person reminiscing you as the facilitator and group members

## **Things to Remember about Reminiscing**

- Reminiscence is a fun activity and should be enjoyed by everyone, including the person who is leading the activity.
- Reminiscence centres of the person who is talking and reminiscing.
- The surrounding environment for the reminiscence activity is very important.
- When working in the community, clubs, residential and nursing homes, day centres etc. use as many familiar spaces as possible.
- Do not rush the process. Take time to get to know people and their personalities.
- Make sure that you create a relaxed atmosphere.
- Be sensitive to individual responses.
- Be aware of the strong, dominant characters in any group reminiscence session.
- Similarly, be aware of the quiet, timid individual in the group.

## **Getting Started: Triggers – what they are and how to use them**

For participants, a trigger:

- is something that aids memory recall. This can be a photograph, a familiar smell, a taste of a familiar food or drink, a favourite piece of music or an object.
- should use one or more of the five senses i.e. sight, sound, taste, smell and touch.
- acts as a starting point to the reminiscence activity

For facilitators, a trigger:

- acts as a confidence booster in delivering the reminiscence session
- helps to define the session theme
- can be used as a prompt for questioning and discussion
- can help to keep discussions on track
- promotes good communication skills

## **Creating a Good Environment**

No matter what the location it is important to try and create the right environment for reminiscence activities. Before beginning a session try to think about what you hope to achieve.

As a facilitator, the most important aspect of the environment is **YOU**. Your personality and actions will help determine the atmosphere.

For participants, the environment should be:

- welcoming
- easy to access
- ordered
- quiet
- well lit

It should also:

- have comfortable chairs
- be near to toilet facilities

For facilitators, the environment should be:

- quiet
- a place to think and prepare
- easy to access and, if appropriate, near to storage facilities
- away from the hustle and bustle of the work space

## **Communication Skills**

Most people communicate by speech and language; however body language is also an important aspect of communication. 'Body Language' is what we can convey without speaking.

Positive body language:

- We can smile
- We can create an atmosphere of calm
- We can make supportive body contact

Negative body language:

- We can look stern
- We can create an atmosphere of anxiety
- We can remain isolated

## **Listening Skills**

Listening may sound a very simple thing to do. The truth is that many of us do not fully listen to what people are saying. Most people are formulating their response to the other persons' question or statement during an everyday conversation. In many conversations information is often lost between one person and the other.

It is virtually impossible not to have a thought in your mind. We need to train ourselves to listen.

Here are some exercises in listening:

- Don't think of your own problems for the next hour

- No matter what is taking place around you, try and be calm
- Think of a large square. Before replying to a question travel around the square in your mind. This process will give you time and space to consider your response and how you will reply.
- Be interested in what the other person is telling you
- If possible, feed back what the person has just said to you
- Occasionally nod your head and make supportive sounds

## **Seating Arrangements**

For planned reminiscence activities, facilitators should ensure that they:

- Arrange the room so that people can sit around a table
- Carefully and sensitively position strong characters near to themselves.
- Place quiet individuals across from or near to themselves
- Check that people are wearing their glasses and they are clean
- Make sure participants can hear and see them
- Sit people with a disability next to someone more able
- Ask wheel chair users if they would prefer to remain in their chairs
- Make sure every one is comfortable

## **Negotiation Skills**

Traditionally, reminiscence and activities in general have not always been seen as an important aspect of care. Facilitators may need to negotiate their requirements with other staff and managers and should be aware that these may be on a long list of sometimes conflicting needs for the home or day centre e.g. reminiscence activities may need to take place in multi-use spaces. Session times and planned activities will need to fit in with the day to day running of the establishment.

Negotiation is all about give and take. The information in this booklet/guidance details ideal situations. These may be available straight away but it might also be necessary to compromise initially and work towards a better ideal, using evidence of success to demonstrate the value of reminiscence and its importance in care situations.

## **When Things Seem To Go Wrong**

Even the most skilled reminiscence worker has bad days when everything seems to go wrong. The most important thing is to be positive and not give up. Take time to find out what has happened; lots of factors that can contribute to a difficult session.

Familiar and common reasons why reminiscence sessions can fail:

- No one seems interested in the theme
- A dominant character seems to take over the group
- People talk amongst themselves
- Members of staff interrupt sessions
- Staff members think the session is about gossiping

The best thing to do when one or all of these things take place is to share your thoughts with a colleague, preferably a fellow reminiscence worker, and formulate a plan of action for the next session. Consider:

- Is the group evenly balanced?
- Is the group size right?
- Are the themes interesting?
- Are the triggers interesting?
- When people insist on talking:
  - o give them a job
  - o ask them to be quiet
- Put a 'Do Not Disturb' notice on the door and ask staff to honour the notice
- Remember that not every one will see reminiscence as an important activity. Ask if you can have a five-minute slot at the next staff meeting to talk about the subject.

## **Timing**

Timing, preparation and making reminiscence sessions fun and enjoyable for the participants is very important for both the facilitator and the participants involved in the activity. Things to consider are:

- Sessions should take place at the same time and location each week
- Sessions should last for no more than an hour

- The hour should be divided into sections
- First few minutes for welcoming and getting people settled
- Main activity should last for approximately 40 minutes
- Last part of the activity is for ending the session. This can be marked by having tea/coffee served

Once started, a reminiscence session can and will, if allowed, carry on and on. It is up to you as facilitator to organise the time and formally finish the session. Always finish a session by telling the participants what will be happening the following week. Re-enforce the theme by putting up notices and telling staff members.

### **Resources for Running Reminiscence Activities**

Reminiscence facilitators need tools to help them with their work (see page 3, section on 'Triggers'). Today, reminiscence resources in the form of loans boxes are often supplied by local museums. Many of these contain items that will be familiar to local residents. Museums offering this service in Gloucestershire are:

[The Museum in the Park, Stroud](#) Tel 01453 763394

[Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum](#) Tel 01242 775701 or 01242 237431

[Corinium Museum, Cirencester](#) Tel 01285 655 611

As they acquire more skills, reminiscence facilitators may also wish to make up their own resources or compliment and personalize the museum resources. They can also obtain copies of supporting documents (e.g. photographs, newspaper articles etc) from their local Archives service:

Gloucestershire Archives Tel 01452 425295

You can get help from learning and outreach staff in museums and archives, and from other people involved in delivering reminiscence activities e.g. [Hampshire County Council](#)

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Updated by Jill Shonk, August 2014*