

# **Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today**

## **Reminiscence in Dementia Care A Guide to Good Practice**

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Foreword by Faith Gibson



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# Contents

	Foreword by Faith Gibson	9
	Preface by Bob Woods	13
<b>Introduction</b>		<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Dementia and Reminiscence: Current Thinking</b>	<b>19</b>
	Dementia	19
	Reminiscence	24
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Reminiscence in Dementia Care</b>	<b>33</b>
	Reasons for using reminiscence in dementia care	33
	Ways of using reminiscence in dementia care	40
	Reminiscence and dementia – a note on the evidence base	50
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Reminiscence Skills and Methods</b>	<b>53</b>
	Attitudes and skills needed for successful reminiscence work	53
	Triggering memories, especially through sensory stimuli	56
	Background research for successful reminiscence work	75
	Working across cultures	77
	Making reminiscence products	78
	Learning from experience and evaluation	81

<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today: A Programme and an Approach</b>	<b>85</b>
	The RYCT approach	85
	The RYCT programme	87
	Comments from participants, leaders and volunteers	90
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Organising a Reminiscence Project</b>	<b>97</b>
	Recruiting the project team	98
	Preparation for the project team	99
	Recruiting and preparing participants	100
	Practical matters	101
	Managing the sessions and structuring the project	105
	Debriefing, monitoring and evaluation	109
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Training for the Project Team and Family Carers</b>	<b>112</b>
	Training activities for the project team	112
	Training activities for family carers	116
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Reminiscence Sessions: Retracing the Life Course</b>	<b>127</b>
	Outline timetable	127
	Session 1: Introductions	128
	Session 2: Childhood and family life	133
	Session 3: Schooldays	139
	Session 4: Starting work and working lives	143
	Session 5: Going out and having fun	148
	Session 6: Weddings	154
	Session 7: Homes, gardens and animals	159
	Session 8: The next generation – babies and children	163
	Session 9: Food and cooking	168
	Session 10: Holidays and travel	171
	Session 11: Celebration	177
	Session 12: Rounding up and evaluation	182
	Adaptations for ‘Reminiscence Alone’ groups	185
	Reunion sessions	190

## **Final Comments and Future Hopes**

**193**

Appendix: Useful documents	195
References	217
Subject Index	220
Author Index	224

Photographs by Alex Schweitzer, Rado Klose and Errollyn Bruce. (Unless otherwise stated, the photographs in this book feature the London RYCT groups.)

# Reminiscence in Dementia Care

## **REASONS FOR USING REMINISCENCE IN DEMENTIA CARE**

### **To get to know and understand people better**

If we are aiming to provide person-centred care, we need to know and understand the people we care for. Bell and Troxel (2001) have argued that life history is as important to holistic care as medical history is to medical care. People with dementia have lived long lives and, to understand them as they are now, we need to know as much as possible about them and the times they have lived through. We may have some basic information about their life history through their case notes, but we can find out much more about people when we show an interest in their past, encourage them to tell their own stories and take note of what they say.

Telling a story about the past involves recreating it each time it is told, which means that it differs according to the mood of the teller and who is listening. This can be confusing, since there can often seem to be little connection between two tellings of 'the same' story, but it does not necessarily point to confusion or inaccuracy on the part of the teller, whether or not that person has dementia. So whatever others may feel about apparent inaccuracies, we should assume that what a person chooses to communicate about his or her past life has the potential to tell us something, both about that life, and about how the person is feeling in the present.

### Pause for thought

You will almost certainly understand what we are saying if you think about your own experience as a listener, and teller, of stories.

- Is the telling of the story of an incident during a wild night out different as told to parents, friends or the police?
- Do you know someone who talks of her marriage (job, childhood, etc.) as a total disaster when she is depressed, but accepts that it has ups and downs when she is feeling happy?
- Do you have things in your own life that you talk about differently depending on your mood and who you are with?

People with dementia (and those without) often tell us things we have heard before, and it is tempting to switch off (Bruce 1998). However, if we decide to listen and pay attention to the way the story is told, asking supplementary questions to show we are listening and are interested, we may find that we get to know new things about them, even from an oft-repeated story, and that we can be clearer about why they tell it so often (Knocker 2002).

## Reminiscence as a means of promoting conversation and communication

For many people, the onset of dementia and the communication difficulties it can bring involves the loss of enjoyable conversation, especially the on-going conversations of a lifetime with close family and friends. Cognitive losses mean that it becomes more difficult to formulate coherent thoughts, and loss of language makes it hard to express thoughts in words. The fear of making mistakes may discourage people from attempting to communicate, and the tendency for other people to show little interest in what they have to say, and to fail to make allowances for their difficulties in saying it, creates additional barriers.

In care homes there are many opportunities for conversation with people with dementia, but they are not always maximised. Studies suggest that carers' conversations with people who have dementia tend to be very brief; frequently there is very little conversation during personal care tasks (Ward *et al.* 2005) and often the interaction that takes place is not very satisfactory for the person with dementia (Hallbiorg *et al.* 1995). Some family carers may report that there is 'no conversation' and this may come about because living

with dementia changes the nature of family relationships so much. Family members often find it hard to manage without the easy verbal communication they had in the past, and find it difficult to accept changes and be content with different, and usually reduced, channels of communication. However, through participation in a reminiscence group, they can learn by example and from one another how to trigger memories in a variety of different ways and be rewarded with smiles of recognition, and sometimes with a recollection they have never heard before.



*Figure 2.1: May and her daughter Pat celebrating May's 100th birthday with the reminiscence group*

### **Recapturing the fun**

A daughter and her mother participated in a reminiscence group together. The daughter commented that it had made her realise that for a long time she and her mother had only been talking about lost money, lost keys and a host of worries and problems. Through going to the group together they learned to leave practical things behind and have much more fun together, looking at old photos and remembering happy times, at home as well as in the meetings.