

Soap Box

Individual Activities by **Steve Reynolds**
- NAPA Chair of Trustees



+ INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY – HOW DO YOU DO IT?

Managers and activity staff I meet agree that meaningful activity is essential for the wellbeing of residents, and most favour a mix of group and individual activities. But many find it difficult to explain how they actually provide individual activities. Some point out they only have one Activity Coordinator for 50 residents, many of whom won't or can't join in activities, and it isn't possible to meet everyone's needs. I understand this, but I think it misses the point. Let me explain.

+ ACTIVITY... NOT ACTIVITIES

I believe we should use the word "activity", and not "activities". That changes everything. "Activity" is how a person is occupied from the moment they wake until they go to bed – daily routines, moving about, meals/refreshments, personal care, talking/socialising, encounters, organised "events", reading, TV, remembering, having visitors etc.

+ YOU HAVE 30 or 40 ACTIVITY STAFF!

Every encounter with a member of staff is also therefore an activity. Nurses, care assistants, catering and maintenance staff, volunteers - all become activity providers. And armed with knowledge of each resident's interests, routines, family, history etc., they can engage in conversation which is meaningful to the person, and stimulate interest, imagination and memories. It's not taking them away from their job, it is their job.

+ SO JUST CHATTING THEN?

No. Through conversation, and knowing the person, staff can help them get the best out of life. They can help them rekindle a previous interest and find things associated with that – books, pictures, utensils, toys, catalogues, clothes and materials, food and drink containers, tools. They can help them go shopping, do housework, go to the pub, play an instrument, cook, prepare food, swim, read, grow plants, paint, sew, video games, internet/emails, follow sport, collect things, visit somewhere, meet an ex-colleague, achieve an ambition, remember loved ones, worship, have a pet, sing. Here's a real-life, simple example. When asked by their key worker what ambitions they had, a resident replied: "to go further into the park". As a wheelchair user, she had only been taken across the road to look at the park with other residents. So the key worker asked for a volunteer to spend the afternoon with her in the park. It brought her such joy - and the planning, preparing, returning, talking about it the next day, photos etc multiplied the time and the beneficial effect many fold.

+ FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTENT

Whether we are a slave to routine, or prefer to go with the flow, we all still have routines, and the older we get, the more important they become, maintaining control of our lives and bringing comfort. Do you have daily "musts"? - Coffee first thing, read a newspaper, watch Countdown, housework, visit a friend or neighbour, phone your daughter? If we take time to learn about each resident's familiar routines, we can help them maintain that sense of control and comfort and add meaning to each day. We are facilitating their personal activity programme.



+ TOO MUCH TO REMEMBER

In one dementia care home I visited, the Activity Coordinator had developed a set of laminated prompt cards on a key ring with a resident's photo on one side, and some key information about their routines, interests etc, on the other. Staff and volunteers picked some up on their way into the lounge or to care for someone. Here's an example:

JAN ROBERTS

Everyday enjoys	Radio4. Dusting dressing table. Going for a walk. Knitting. Classical music after lunch. Early evening TV. Chat at bedtime
Every week	Mon: Hairdresser Tues: Family/friend to lunch Wed: Church service Thurs: PAT dog Fri: Help in shop Sat: Manicure
Interests	Choir, grandson at university, swimming, caravan in Wales, bric-a-brac shops, Spaniel called "Tuppence"

+ SO, SCRAP GROUP ACTIVITIES, THEN?

No! A programme of events is essential. These bring people together, create a community and provide variety, exercise, stimulation and fun. But remember that the 8 or 10 people who regularly attend your activity groups may only be a very small percentage of the resident population.

+ SO, I DON'T NEED AN ACTIVITY COORDINATOR

Yes! Every home should have someone to organise, facilitate, plan and review the social care provision. It works best when this person, as well as running some group activities, is assessing and reviewing, encouraging, prompting and coaching other staff to embrace the notion of "activity" and meaningful engagement. And someone who thinks outside the box – contacting the community, relatives, finding stuff, and surfing the internet.

If you do all this already, then I am impressed and thank you. You are leading the way. Why not write to us here at NAPA, and we'll share your ideas on individual activity in our next magazine? Or maybe you think this is too idealistic and impractical. Write and tell us that too and we'll get a debate going.