



Top Tips for Reminiscence Activities Family Carers and Friends

Reminiscence is a well-established and effective activity which can lend itself to many topics and themes. There are many excellent publications which provide a wealth of ideas for reminiscence. However, the aim of this guide is not to repeat these but to try to illustrate how reminiscence can be used as an integral part of daily life and not just a one off session to look at 'old things. Ideally reminiscence should be viewed as a daily activity as many of the things that we see, do, or hear each day can remind us of events, people, or feelings from the past.

Reminiscence is a good way of encouraging conversation and connection, and it helps to maintain a sense of identity. It can really help family carers to gain a better understanding of their relative. It must always be appreciated that, for some, reminiscence may be painful especially if it relates to lost loved ones or unpleasant memories of childhood or traumatic events.

Reminiscence and dementia

Reminiscence can be of great benefit to people living with dementia as it generally accesses longer term memories which may often remain strong as the short term memory becomes compromised. It contributes to a 'life history' which can help family carers gain a better understanding of their relative and perhaps uncover reasons for particular types of communication. It may take your relative back to a time in their life when they were fit and well and help to escape from the frustrations of their current condition.

A reminiscence area

Your relative may be in the fortunate position to have enough space in their home care to keep reminiscence objects. These could be objects from a nursery, a shop, lounge, kitchen, library or even a garden shed filled with items which can generally be picked up quite cheaply from charity shops or car boot sales. This can help your relative to feel a sense of context and belonging. It can also provide a sense of comfort and familiarity as well as purpose which may come from moving, cleaning or sorting items. These can be kept in a specific corner, cupboard or rummage box depending on the space available in your relative's home.

Everyday objects

A wide range of everyday objects can be used to trigger conversation and memories. Any contact with your relative is an opportunity for conversation and connection.

Here are some examples related to daily living:

- A hairbrush may prompt memories of having their hair brushed as a child or they may have worked as a hairdresser or barber
- Scents and toiletries used when washing/bathing such as lavender might prompt strong memories. Your relative may also have clear memories of bath time as a child such as using a tin bath and sharing the water with other family members

- Choices of clothes and accessories – some men may always prefer to wear a shirt and tie or have a handkerchief folded in their pocket. You could chat about how smart they look and why they feel it's important to look smart
- Objects in their home can also be a prompt for reminiscence. This may be photographs, ornaments, CDs they like or books they have
- Recent events such as a grandchild passing a driving test or someone going on holiday can prompt discussion and reminiscence.

Triggers around the home

Placing items in different locations around your relative's home can act as triggers to prompt memories and conversation. These could be items such as old photographs, advertisements or posters, picture books of old vehicles, social scenes, or the local area. Old household items such as telephones, mock food packets, kitchen items such as old jelly moulds, mixing bowls or enamel mugs, old tools (which are safe to handle) anything really! Moving these around regularly can provide stimulation and interest.

If your relative is less mobile, consider setting up a 'memory table' or use a tray if your relative is cared for in bed. These items can be changed regularly to maintain interest and prompt different memories.

These triggers could be themed such as old kitchen items, old clothes and accessories, old work related items such as an old typewriter. Weddings or raising children can also be great themes with plenty of related objects.

Items with distinctive textures, such as fabrics like satin or fur or natural items such as conkers (prickly in their cases, smooth and shiny out of them) or smells, such as spices, herbs, lavender, cleaning products, soap, or medicine smells (obviously making sure they are safe to handle) can be useful if your relative finds it hard to communicate verbally.

Building a memory box, album, or life story

Building up a memory box, memory album or life map can be an engaging individual project for you and your relative. This can also involve other members of the family and friends. How the memories are recorded and stored can take various forms such as items in a box, making a scrap book or using a life map. This may make a nice activity to be built on when other relatives or friends visit and gives each visit a key purpose. The information gathered and learnt during this activity can help you to gain an even stronger connection with your relative.

Triggers around the home

There are many topics and themes which lend themselves very well to reminiscence work, such as:

- Holidays
- Childhood games
- Household chores
- Working life
- Local history
- Transport
- Courtship and marriage
- Days out
- Evenings out and social life
- Hobbies and interests
- Special celebration days

We have just taken one example, local history, to show how it can be developed into a series of activities for you to enjoy together over time.

Local history

An ongoing weekly project that can be added to over time could be to investigate the history of the local area. This can involve many individual events or activities all under the same theme, for example:

- Make or buy a large map of the local area and mark on it where your relative has lived during their lives. This could be expanded into a UK wide or even a world map if your relative has lived abroad, come from another country, or has worked in different locations. You could use stickers, map pins or bits of string linking back to a photo of your relative to show where they have lived or been
- Take your relative to visit the streets where they have lived (if they are local) or take photos of them to show them if they are not able to go to see them (be mindful that this could be potentially upsetting if the house has been destroyed). Can you trace what's happened to the sites using local knowledge, library records, maps, and the internet? Google maps is a great source of information.
- Chat about favourite shops – your relative may remember a shop keepers' names or the characters who used to buy and sell in the streets like the rag and bone man.
- You could pick a local landmark, such as a town hall, mosque or stately home and trace its history. You could develop a timeline of the changes it may have been through and perhaps find photographs from different years. This information could be displayed as a frieze along a wall or in a scrapbook
- Tell your relative about local planning developments and/or take them to see large building projects as they develop
- You may wish to attend talks by local historians
- Perhaps your relative would like to draw or paint pictures of local landmarks either from memory, from photos or by visiting the landmark

Talks from museums or local historians

Your local community may have a local history group or individuals who have written books on local history. These people can make very interesting speakers and the individuals may be a great source of information for them and may be able to develop an ongoing relationship.

Occasional

Reminiscence can really be linked to any theme and so should have some relevance to most if not all of the larger events your relative as experienced in their lifetime. For example, weddings, parties, religious festivals etc.

If you would like to discuss the information included in this resource, please call the NAPA Helpline; our free and confidential activity support service.

