

Communication, social connectedness and relationships: Working with life history

Pamela Dunne

Clinical Nurse Specialist in Dementia

*DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES and
NATIONAL INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY MEMORY SERVICE*

Tallaght University Hospital

NATIONAL INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY
MEMORY SERVICE



Tallaght
University
Hospital
Ospidéal
Ollscoile
Thamhlachta
An Academic Partner of Trinity College Dublin



Daughters of Charity
Disability Support Services

With support from



An Roinn Sláinte
Department of Health

Communication

- Communication is a fundamental aspect of all human relationships.
- It is the way we connect with other people, the way we maintain relationships.



Language is a powerful tool

- The words we use can strongly influence how others treat or view people with dementia.
- Referring to people with dementia as “sufferers” or as “victims” implies they are helpless.
- We have a responsibility to use language that is empowering and inclusive of the diverse experiences of dementia.

Dementia and Communication and well-being

Malcolm Goldsmith book Hearing the Voice of People with Dementia (1996)
conclusions are unequivocal;

‘it is possible to be involved in meaningful communication with the majority of people with dementia but we must be able to enter into their world, understand their sense of pace and time, recognize the problems of distraction and realize that there are many ways in which people with dementia express themselves and that it is our responsibility to learn how to recognize these’

(1996; 165).

Understanding common challenges

- A person with dementia may have trouble finding the right word, they may repeat words and phrases, or may become 'stuck' on certain sounds.
- In addition, people with dementia are likely to have other sensory impairments (such as sight or hearing problems) which can also make it harder to communicate.

Communication Strategies-

Before you speak

- Environment – quiet, with good lighting and no distractions
- Position yourself in front of the person at eye level
- Get the person's full attention
- Relaxed body language. Make eye contact; smile, over emphasize and exaggerate expressions



Communication Strategies- how to speak

- Short, simple sentences
- Speak clearly and calmly, avoid raising your voice - DON'T SHOUT.
- Slow pace, and allow time for the person to process the information and respond.
- Try to avoid asking too many questions, or complicated questions.
- Augment verbal communication with visual aids



Communication Strategies-

Try to avoid

- Avoid “***You are wrong***” messages
 - No, you’re not going to work today.
 - No, this is your home now.
 - No, you can’t go now
- Avoid ‘I’ve just told you that’
Having to answer the same question several times can be frustrating, but repetition will happen.
- Avoid asking too many open-ended questions
it could be stressful for a person with dementia if they can’t remember the answer (what is my name?, Do you know me?)

Listening

- *Be Patient*

Someone with dementia may need time to find the right word. Allow time for the person to process what they heard and to respond

- *Listen beyond words; Be Creative*

Focus more on the overall message than the literal words being spoken. Reading body language and emotions can be useful.

The person may express disapproval in alternative ways such as their shaking their head, turning away or murmuring. It is important to listen to and acknowledge this message.



Life history

NATIONAL INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY
MEMORY SERVICE

Life story links us to our past, grounds us in the present and helps to give meaning to our lives. Holding on to the stories of our lives is how we maintain a sense of who we are. Despite the many losses that people with dementia endure the most devastating loss of all for the person is a loss of a sense of themselves.

...a life story book can be an atlas, the compass, the guide to finding their self."

Kitwood



Creating Meaningful opportunities for communication

NATIONAL INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY
MEMORY SERVICE

MEMORY BOXES

Creating boxes filled with meaningful objects and memories

This can also provide sensory stimulation e.g. Familiar sensations could evoke memories

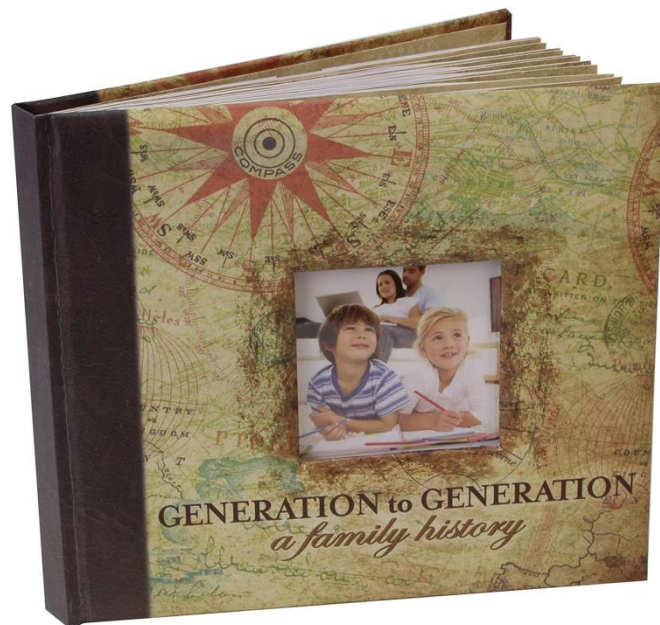


PHOTO ALBUMS

Looking at photos with care staff, friends and family, both as a means of social interaction and as a way for them to get to know you or remembering with you can really enhance the individuals living experience.

Creating Meaningful opportunities for communication

CONVERSATION PROMPTS



TALKING ALBUMS



Voice Recordable Photo Album with 20 pages. Useful for reminiscence or life story work. Add photo's and record a message or music

Benefits of Digital Life Story

- Powerful tool -facilitates **meaningful communication**
- It draws on residual **long term memory**
- It's an **enjoyable** activity for the person, staff and family
- It recall people's skills and **strengths**
- It enhances **self worth** and a unique **identity**
- It builds understanding and **friendships**
- Can assist in **transition** between care environment



Digital Life Story

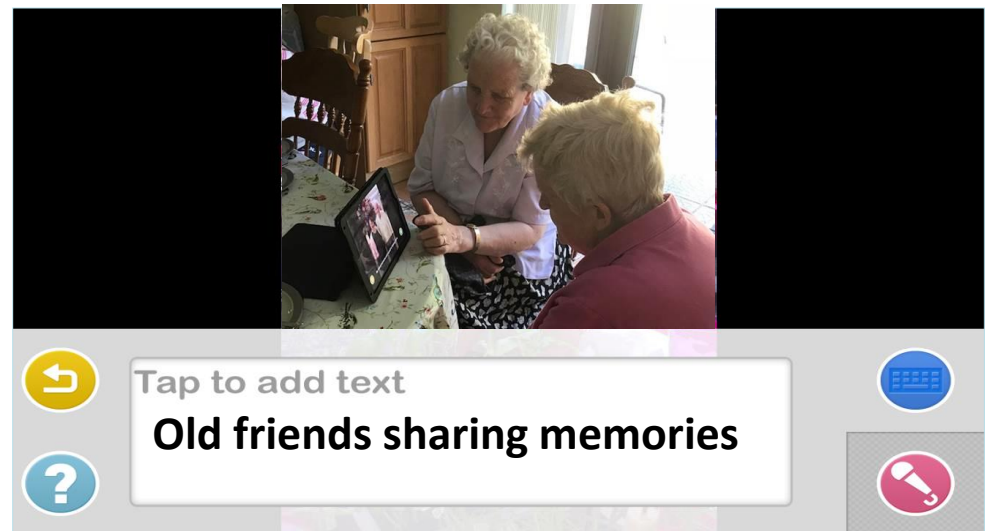
- Facilitates the person to narrate **their own experiences** and memories of each photograph, thus ensuring the personal importance of each memory and providing a familiar sound (i.e. the person's own voice, rather than the voice of a stranger or staff member for later reminiscence.
- Two way communication tool between the person and family/friends.



Application of technology to create individual life stories

Example Chapters:

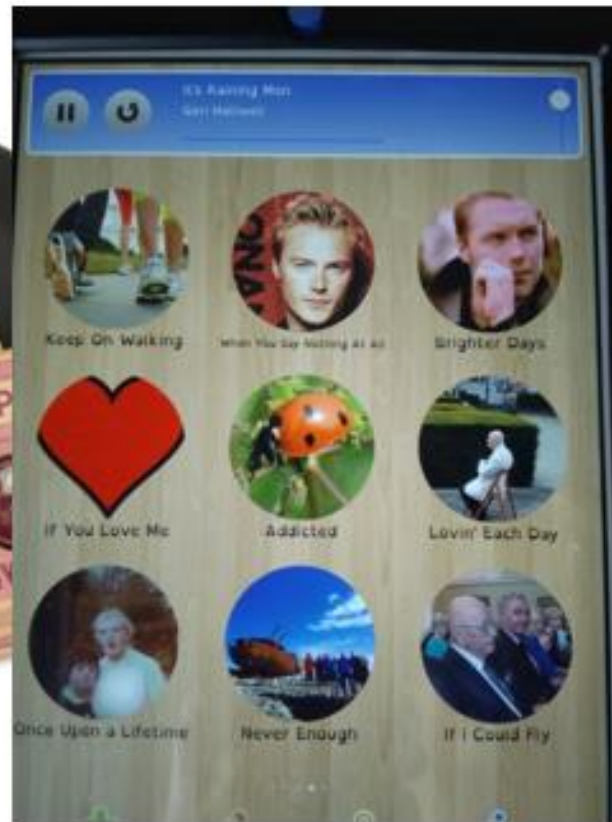
- An Introduction about me
- My Childhood
- My Family/friends
- Interests/Activities
- Significant Life Events
- Special Achievements
- Special People and Places
- Likes/dislikes
- Music
- Faith
- Conversation Prompts



Add narrative and voice recording to photos to build meaningful memories

Recording Musical preference

NATIONAL INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY
MEMORY SERVICE



Meaningful Communication

NATIONAL INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY
MEMORY SERVICE

“Even if a person cannot hold on to his or her own narrative identity, due to loss of memory it can still be held by others”

Kitwood 1997



As dementia progresses the person depends on us to uphold their identity

“Having her life story on her iPad helped me to get to know her. I could hear her voice, her laugh. I could see the person she was and still is”

New staff member

In Summary: Guidelines for effective COMMUNICATIONS connections

NATIONAL INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY
MEMORY SERVICE

- C:** Care enough to listen carefully
- O:** Openly display respect
- M:** Make and eye and touch contact to attract attention
- M:** Monitor the feelings and emotional words 'behind' the words
- U:** Understand the language of your posture, facial expression, voice tone, and word selection
- N :** Notice the persons non verbal communication
- I:** Interject or identify missing words, if appropriate
- C:** Communicate by connecting with multisensory cues
- A:** Assess for environmental distractions
- T:** Try therapeutic fibs, if appropriate
- I:** Ignore your need to be right, to argue or confront
- O:** Observe behaviours as communications
- N:** Nurture well-being through communication connection
- S:** Sensitivity set the tone for success

(Hellen 1998: 68-71)

Finally remember.....

People with dementia are
“trying to survive in a world
full of uncertainty and
insecurity”. To understand
their world we must pay
attention to it. To pay
attention to it we have to
know something about it.



Acknowledgements

NATIONAL INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY
MEMORY SERVICE

- **The project team: Evelyn Reilly, Cathy Mc Carthy, Rhoda Judge, Stephanie Lynch and Ferrilyth Lowe.**
- **Prof Mary McCarron, Trinity College Dublin**
- **Service Users and their families in the Daughters of Charity**
- **Staff members and Volunteers from the Daughters of Charity**
- **Management teams in the Daughters of Charity:
Lisa Lavelle, Karina O’Sullivan, Tom MacArdle, Mary Lucey, Mary Reynolds, Eilish Madden and Michael Stokes.**