



Remembering When

Facilitators can use resident memories to spur social interaction and aid in the treatment of dementia-related disease.

REMEMBERING THE PAST CAN BRING a great deal of satisfaction and understanding for anyone. For the elderly, it is a way to affirm who they are, what they've accomplished in their lives, and a chance to relive happy times. For those who suffer with dementia, it is a way to talk easily about things they do remember.

It is also a way for residents of assisted living facilities to become better acquainted with one another, which is helpful for caregivers as well as family.

Reminiscing has taken place since the beginning of time through the storytelling of family histories across all nations. Modern gerontologists have studied the benefits of reminiscing with dementia patients because long-term memory is the last to go. By talking about their childhood and early adulthood, older adults who suffer with dementia are more confident about socializing and using their verbal skills.

Reminiscence therapy (RT) is the process of recalling personal experiences from an individual's past. The theory behind RT is that an individual's function is improved by decreasing demands on impaired cognitive abilities and capitalizing on preserved ones.

Props From The Past

RT has been shown to be helpful in reducing reclusive tendencies that cause depression and anxiety. Additional benefits can include helping individuals come to terms with growing older, encouraging older people to regain interest in past hobbies and pastimes, increasing self worth and a sense of achievement, and reducing apathy and

TIPS FOR REMINISCENCE THERAPY GROUPS

KeeP the following in mind when facilitating a group session:

- Group numbers should be small, no more than eight or 10 when working with older people who do not have dementia and no more than six when working with older people who have early to moderate stages of dementia.

For older people with advanced dementia, the group should consist of no more than three people.

- The duration of sessions may vary, depending on the group. For a group that communicates and reminisces well, the session may go as long as 45 minutes, while a group that has individuals who are in the moderate stages of dementia should be kept to 20 to 30 minutes. Shorter portions of time should be allowed for those with advanced dementia.

- Quiet, intimate, and comfortable sur-

roundings are important in order to make participants feel at ease.

- Do not use too many objects per session, as this can overwhelm participants with too much stimuli. Keep the number of objects or props to six.

- As facilitator, it is important to do as much listening and as little talking as possible. Occasional cues or prompts may be necessary to keep the discussion flowing.

- Ask open-ended questions that require more than yes or no answers.

- Keep track of who has spoken during the session. Facilitators should provide support and encouragement to everyone in the group to participate.

- Don't be concerned if the discussion leads to subjects beyond the theme of the session; one memory can trigger others, and all are important in the reminiscence process.

Source: "Reminiscing Handbook, The Benevolent Society," Australia, 2005. Go to: www.bensoc.org.au/uploads/documents/reminiscing-handbook-jan2006.pdf.

confusion, especially in people who are confused or disoriented.

Therapy sessions may consist of individual or group settings or take place during everyday interactions and activities of daily living.

Group sessions may meet weekly or bi-weekly in community-based settings or at residential settings like assisted living or nursing facilities. The sessions give clients an opportunity to bond, while becoming more familiar with each other.

Preparation begins with the selection of several topics to discuss, which gives the moderator options if the conversation begins to dwindle on one of the topics.

Some topics may require a little on-

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Focus On CAREGIVING

line research beforehand. For example, the topics of “wash days of long ago, trains, and art in your childhood home” were easy to use after discovering two stories online that were then recited in class.

A physical prompt or prop is useful in recounting the story. An old clothes iron, a toy vintage tractor, and telephone line insulators are some examples. They are fun for participants to pass around as icebreakers.

The moderator should ask questions related to each topic, but try to remain flexible and let the conversation take its own path.

Relevant books that might interest the group can also be helpful to stories. For instance, “To Kill a Mockingbird” was used one week, while another time, the story of how “Gone With the Wind” was made became a good focal point for discussion. In addition, the

latter had large photos that were easily shared with the group.

RT sessions began at The Meadows, an assisted living facility in Elk Grove, Calif., in the spring of 2010. The venue for this group is a medium-sized room equipped with a long table and chairs. A circle of chairs would better accommodate the class, but it is nice to have the table to pass things around on.

An older gentleman surprised the group recently by bringing in his mother’s “Guide for a New Bride” book. It was nearly 100 years old. It was a gift from the county of San Diego where his mother had been married.

Make Eye Contact

Making eye contact with each person in the group is essential. It is also important to ensure that everyone has

a chance to share an experience related to one of the topics.

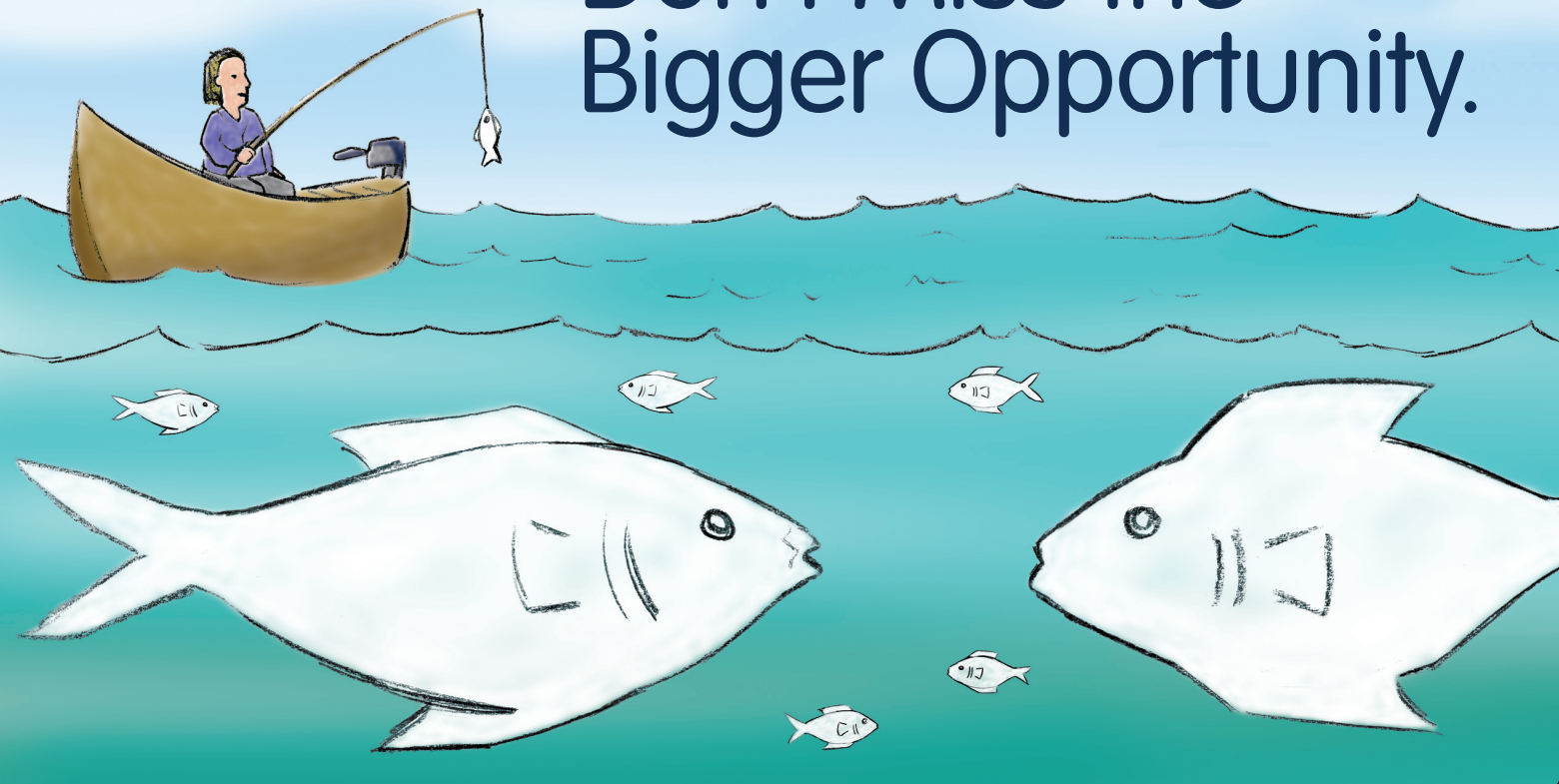
While there are three topics prepared for each class, the facilitator needn’t feel compelled to talk about all three unless it seems expedient.

The website Good Old Days Stories (www.goodolddaysstories.com) contains a database of stories that help spark memories and discussion. Several stories from this site were retold to the Elk Grove elders to prompt recollections of wash days, trains, and art.

The wash day story described how Mondays were usually wash days in one particular household, where water was heated in a big oval-shaped galvanized or copper wash boiler on top of a wood cookstove.

“If our cistern had enough soft [rain] water, we’d heat that water. Then we’d dip the boiling water into the washing machine—a big round tub-like

Don't Miss the Bigger Opportunity.



machine,” the story says. “We had a Briggs & Stratton gas motor to run the leather belt to make the dolly turn to rub the soil out of the clothes. The dolly was a paddle affair.

“Nowadays, we can do laundry in cold water and not worry so much about colors mixing. It was a catastrophe if a red article that faded was washed with white underwear. Many a guy wore pink underwear!”

The narrator of this story notes that he used an old broomstick handle to pull the hot clothes from the washer into the wringer. “A wringer had two hard rubber rollers that we put the clothes between to let most of the sudsy hot water run back into the washer.”

The story was followed by questions to get the group talking, such as: How many of you used a rub board? Where did your water come from—the well outside, the creek, or indoor plumbing?

How did you dry your clothes when you were young? How many sets of clothes did you own? How long did it take your mother to wash clothes?

Residents recalled heating the water in a big kettle while their mothers worked the scrub board. Many of them agreed that the smell of their sheets that had dried in the sun is still a fond memory.

Sharing A Laugh

During another session a toy tractor was brought in to stimulate conversation. One resident talked about her father teaching her to drive the tractor.

The fields were laid out with fruit drying in the sun, and she worked all day with her father. She drove the tractor while he piled the wagon up with dried fruit. She smiled as she told the story and said with a bit of pride, “I was just eight years old!”

Life accomplishments were another topic. All the women who were mothers said their children were their greatest accomplishment. One woman added, “After my children were raised, I went back to college and earned my degree in accounting. I was over 40 years old, but I did it. I was able to gain employment and was promoted into management many years before I retired.”

Such recollections are beneficial for building and maintaining self-esteem.

Participants have become better acquainted with their fellow residents, giving them a sense of camaraderie and community. Laughter is always a by-product of the sessions, which usually include an old-time sing-along and recitation of childhood rhymes. ■

Trivia Survey

■ See next page



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Reminiscence Therapy Tool: Trivia Games

Reminiscence therapy sessions can sometimes be made richer by playing a trivia game with participants. Below are some trivia questions and answers about trains.

1. In 1831 in the U.S., what was carried by the railroad? *Mail, lumber, cattle*
2. What is the car called that has sleeping accommodations? *Pullman*
3. The final spike in the transcontinental railroad driven in at a ceremony at Promontory Pike was made of what metal? *Gold*
4. What was the name of the famous waitresses that served on those early trains? *The Harvey Girls*
5. Which two railroad companies did President Lincoln select to build the transcontinental railroad? *Pacific Union and the Central Pacific*
6. Who were the famous train robbing brothers? *Frank & Jesse James*
7. What is the triangular piece of the frame on the front of the locomotive called? *A cowcatcher*
8. Who was in charge in railroad yards to make sure trains are lined up in the right order? *The yardmaster*
9. Bill Cody earned his nickname by killing what for meat for the railroad workers? *Buffalo*
10. What was the title of the person responsible for taking your tickets on the train? *Conductor*
11. What fuel was used on early trains? *Coal & Wood*
12. What was the structure called where the trains were serviced? *The round house*

Source: Karen Everett Watson, a reminiscence facilitator, freelance journalist, and certified gerontologist. She designs her theme-based sessions to engage seniors in the beneficial activity of remembering. Her website is www.legacywriter.me/.