

ABOUT REMINISCENCE WORK

Reminiscence is the act or process of recalling and sharing one's memories, and is a normal part of everyday life for most people of all ages. In their later years, however, people often lose those with whom they have most in common, whether through bereavement or geographical separation, leaving them feeling very alone with their memories. It can therefore be very enjoyable and helpful to join in more structured reminiscence sessions. These may be one-to-one sessions with another person for the specific purpose of retracing, reviewing and reflecting back over a lifetime's experience in order to achieve a sense of completeness and resolution. More commonly it will involve joining a group with others of a similar age and background to share memories and to make new friendships and connections.

A group leader or facilitator will stimulate and guide the discussion, introduce exercises and activities and will frequently use multi-sensory triggers to stimulate the return and reconsideration of memories. Most of the exercises and creative activities suggestions attached to each chapter of this book relate to group work, but the same underlying principles inform all reminiscence.

Over the last twenty-five years, there has been a considerable growth in reminiscence activity with older people. Its benefits in terms of health and social well-being have become more and more valued.

Here are some reasons for doing reminiscence work:

Community building - sharing memories with others from a similar background generates a strong sense of belonging to a community and having a valued role within it

Cultural integration - reminiscence is also a means of celebrating difference, bringing communities with different racial, cultural and religious backgrounds together to exchange life experience

Combating isolation - loss of partners and close friends in later life can lead to isolation and withdrawal. Reminiscence offers a means of inclusion in a desirable social group which shares a common life experience

Friendship - pleasurable contact through sharing common memories can become the basis for new friendships between participants in the present

Finding perspective - having an opportunity to share and reflect on one's experience of life in a supportive atmosphere increases people's sense of identity, their sense of who they are. It helps people to integrate the different parts of their life into a more meaningful whole

A sense of history - sharing stories with people of the same generation or with much younger people helps to develop a sense of oneself as a participant in the great social and historical upheavals of the last century

Respect - in reminiscence everyone is the expert on his or her own life and is recognised as an individual with unique experience to impart

Stimulation - being in a group where the memories are shared can stimulate the recall of long-forgotten experiences and put participants back in touch with parts of their lives which are pleasurable to remember

Psychological support - where memories are painful, it can be helpful to find others who can relate to one's own past struggles, so one does not have to feel so alone in suffering

Creativity - encouraging people to explore their memories through creative activities is pleasurable for participants and entertaining for anyone with whom they may wish to share their results.

Empowerment - reminiscence work with people with special needs, and especially older people with dementia, can help to build self-confidence and independence by concentrating on strengths and creating opportunities for success

Readers who wish to undertake this work for the first time might like to reflect on the essential elements of the reminiscence process and the skills and qualities it requires.

Essential reminiscence skills and qualities:

Some of the essential skills listed below may sound so obvious that they don't need pointing out. It is true that some people are 'naturals' when it comes to engaging with older people and valuing their memories, but it is necessary to practise and develop these essential skills to use them purposely and in a planned way.

- **good listening skills:** be very attentive to what each speaker is saying, showing that you are 'there' for them, and do not rush to prompt or question
- **receptiveness:** relax, and show in your body language, including eye contact, that you are pleased to be listening and that you are interested and value what is being said
- **curiosity:** you need to have a genuine desire to know more and to learn from the older people, especially as they will be very quick to stop reminiscing if they feel you are bored or doing this work out of duty
- **sensitivity:** make yourself receptive to the feelings which the speaker is revealing as well as the content, especially where a painful memory may have been triggered, and guard against questioning which may be experienced as intrusive

- **an accepting attitude:** do not judge the person remembering, but rather show that you have heard and understood what they said and respect their point of view
- **a reasonable memory:** you must be able to recall what has been said and be able to refer back to it, in order to make the person remembering feel it is worthwhile talking to you, and so you can make links between different stories
- **a sense of humour:** you need be able to create an easy atmosphere, sharing the funny side of things remembered, and delighting in the unexpected and bizarre
- **adaptability:** you must be willing to change plans quickly and 'go with' the interests and needs expressed by the person, or the group, without making them feel that you have no sense of direction yourself
- **imagination:** some people find that talking is more difficult than other means of communication, such as drawing, singing, dancing, showing, etc, so you need to provide many possibilities for creative expression of memories

When working with a group, there are additional requirements:

- **clarity:** be clear about the group's purpose and objectives and make sure people know and accept them, including practical aspects such as the number and duration of sessions, where they will be held and when
- **a democratic approach:** everyone's contributions must be valued and the time available to the group must be shared
- **confidentiality:** it is essential to create a sense of security and confidentiality within the group and to make sure all group members accept this idea
- **group work skills:** there are always links and connections between what different group members say, however different their backgrounds may be. Good facilitation involves pointing up these links for the group and creating a sense of shared experience and common ground
- **preparedness:** group work needs forward planning so that culturally appropriate resources are to hand which will stimulate all the senses. This includes having relevant things to taste, smell, handle, look at, listen to and use in the sessions
- **confidence:** the group must feel that the facilitator knows what he or she is doing, and can take control if difficult situations arise between people in the group or around painful or challenging memories

- **courage:** the group leader should be willing to tackle complex and emotional subjects, as long as the group wishes this. He or she must not lose confidence if there are moments of sadness, bearing in mind that the empathy and support of other group members who have shared similar experiences is one of the elements that can make reminiscence such a comforting process
- **caring:** there is a responsibility to take care of the emotional needs of group members, ensuring that each person is welcomed individually. If someone is distressed, time is made for them to talk (if necessary after the session) and extra help is made available if required
- **practicality:** the physical needs of the group must be considered, so that everyone can hear and see everyone else in the session. Arrangements should be made for people who are hard of hearing to sit near or opposite the group leader, and the room for reminiscing should be quiet, warm, well lit and undisturbed.

Wherever possible, it is desirable to include in the reminiscence sessions care staff, volunteers and any others who may be looking after the group members. Through joining in the sessions, they can learn more about the backgrounds, likes and dislikes, achievements, skills, joys and sorrows of the older people. This knowledge can make a significant difference to their job satisfaction, by increasing their understanding, providing topics for future conversation and assisting them to care for the elders in a more personal way.

PLANNING A SERIES OF REMINISCENCE SESSIONS

Agreeing structure, ground rules, length, time and place:

The chapters in this book offer a chronological approach to structuring reminiscence work, but of course there are many other alternatives. For example, one can follow the cycle of the current year, and ask the group to share memories associated with different seasons and festivals. Or one can pick themes that are of interest to each member of the group in turn, and jump backwards and forwards in time.

Another approach is to concentrate on one subject or theme over a number of weeks, exploring it ever more deeply, with a group who have a real interest in it. Having a particular end-product in mind from the outset, whether it be a play, a film, a book or an exhibition of photos and memories, will also provide a framework for the sessions. Begin with gathering memories, and then go on either recording and editing them or exploring them through expressive and visual arts until the material is ready for presenting to others. In any of these instances, it is desirable to have all members sign a simple form at the beginning of the process, indicating that they are happy to have their material used for educational, research or performance purposes.

Whatever the proposed plan, it is important for the participants to understand it, accept it in outline, and feel able to contribute to shaping it as it develops. There does not need to be any written contract with the group, but it is

necessary to agree about objectives and ground rules at the outset, especially concerning mutual respect and confidentiality, attentive listening to one another, and a willingness to share memories in a non-judgemental atmosphere.

The group leader needs to agree a framework for the reminiscence sessions, saying how many weeks the group will run and roughly what theme or topic will be discussed in which week. However, it is very important to be flexible enough to respond to spontaneous developments within the group. A great interest in a particular topic, for example, may emerge and it might therefore need two weeks to itself, or an event in the external world might trigger a lot of memories which need to be shared in the group.

Each session needs to have a shape, with starter activities, a main section for story-telling and creative work, and a conclusion, which should include a summary of what has been covered and confirmation of what will be talked about in the next session. It is desirable to build a break for refreshments into each session, as this can strengthen the group feeling and create a relaxed atmosphere.

There needs to be a balance between the safety of trusting the group leader and the excitement of feeling that anything can happen and that the group members themselves can be instrumental in making it happen. The group leader needs to remind the group how many sessions remain, and alert them to the approaching end, preparing a final session which celebrates what they have achieved. If the group members really wish to continue after the proposed number of sessions has been completed, it is important that the leader renegotiates with them and agrees a new schedule. It is always safer for the leader and the group to commit to a fixed number of sessions (between 6 and 12) and then extend, rather than start with long-term commitments that have to be shortened.

Themes and topics:

Some themes are particularly fruitful to explore with groups, and many activities attached to the chapters that follow focus on these themes

- Childhood games and pastimes
- Family life and grandparents
- Food and cooking
- School days
- Ambitions and dreams
- Starting work
- Courting days
- Entertainment and fashion
- Weddings

- Having babies and bringing up a family
- Festivals, rituals, special occasions, weekends
- Significant journeys, holidays and travel
- Wartime memories (but this is not appropriate for everyone)

Multi-sensory triggers:

Whatever the theme, it is important to offer different types of sensory stimulation in order to help people remember. Objects familiar to group members from earlier days are a good starting point and they can stimulate many senses. For example, an old hand-made shopping basket will have a smell, a texture, a design, a weight when empty and full, a physical association with carrying and shopping, and a taste connection with food purchased in the past in markets and shops. Objects also have different associations for different people, so that comparing one person's memory of going shopping with someone else's will be a way of conjuring up their different backgrounds and communities.

Often objects provide a more relaxing starting point than questions, provided they are chosen with care and are culturally appropriate to the group members. Here are some of the sources of stimulation, which can help to make reminiscence sessions varied and enjoyable:

- **Sight:** photos, films, paintings and colours, maps, flags and symbols, diagrams, technical drawings, posters, skies, growing things
- **Sounds:** songs, familiar and unfamiliar music, bird and animal sounds, weather (storms, wind, rain), sounds of trains and ships, machinery noise
- **Words:** place names, famous people, stories, scandals, proverbs and poems
- **Tastes:** food, drink, sweets, medicine, cooking and baking, unusual or foreign foods to try, old recipes remembered from childhood
- **Smell:** medicine, perfume, make-up, cleaning agents, mothballs, herbs, spices, cooking smells, flowers, trees and countryside smells, coal and wood burning
- **Touch:** contrasting textures, contrasting temperatures (warm and cold), different fabrics, human touch, food ingredients, animals to stroke, babies to cuddle, clothes to handle and fold
- **Movement:** games, dance, mime, greetings, gestures, work movements such as typing, sewing, lifting, digging, religious rituals

DEALING WITH PAINFUL ISSUES

Reminiscence sessions often lead into more wide-ranging discussions concerning how people's past decisions are now affecting their lives, often in ways they had not wished or expected. Feelings of pain, displacement and loss will surface, anxieties concerning citizenship and security, fears for health and welfare in the future, and unresolved family problems and conflicts. Fear of raising these issues can inhibit workers who may wish to undertake reminiscence work. They may feel that they are not adequately prepared to deal with the "fall-out" from such discussions and that it is safer to avoid them. However, reminiscence sessions can provide a valuable opportunity for group members to share some of these painful feelings with others who are familiar with them and who can empathise. This sharing often helps to reduce the burden for the elders of coping with such feelings alone and provides much-needed support for individuals. In this sense, reminiscence is not just about sharing the past, but very much about coping with the present and facing the future

RECORDING MEMORIES

If a reminiscence group is being recorded, it is important to ask people to speak one at a time, and to say their names before speaking. This avoids a lot of confusion for the person transcribing the tape, but it also creates the right atmosphere of respectful listening which is essential if the speaker is going to feel that the effort is worthwhile. People must be asked if they are content to have the session recorded, and the reasons for doing so should be explained. No individual should be obliged to speak or made to feel bad if they decide just to listen.

The most common method is to record what people say in the group on to a tape machine or minidisk and then write out some of the most interesting stories. It is desirable to stick closely to the speech patterns of the story-teller, but always make sure a reader can easily grasp what the speaker meant, tidying and clarifying where necessary and omitting statements which are muddled or confusing.

Transcribing recorded memories is a time-consuming process, but it is a very effective way of showing group members that what they say is valuable and valued. It is desirable to put in at least a sentence from each person in any such summary, so that no one feels left out or inadequate. It helps everyone to feel part of a significant process and starts them imagining who else might be interested to read these memories.

If the text is typed and enlarged, the story can be exhibited on the walls of the meeting place to show others using the building what is going on in the group, and what interesting stories the elders have to tell. Photos of the group at work, perhaps showing some of the objects they have brought into the group, will help to get the message across.

Using video to record reminiscence sessions is now much easier than before, since cameras are tiny and so unobtrusive that they do not inhibit the speakers, but always ask for the group's consent before filming. Video is a good medium for capturing and remembering the spirit of a group in action. It can be enjoyable for a group to watch themselves on film and remember what fun they had together, and recall some of the stories they may have forgotten from previous sessions. It is also useful to film people's old photographs and objects. These images can be used with voice-over commentary in any future edited version. However, video editing is skilled work and can be expensive, so unless this element is funded, the tapes may have a limited value, except as a record of the group in action.

One other use of video tape is as a training and consciousness-raising tool for the reminiscence group leader, and any volunteers or co-workers who may be involved in the sessions. It can illustrate skilled leadership and assist people to identify lost opportunities, inept or insensitive responses and draw attention to the need to include, rather than exclude, all members. For this sort of use, it is sensible to film sparingly from time to time during a session, so that there is not hours of footage produced which no one will have the time to watch.

CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEMORIES:

It often happens that people who start to record their stories become much more confident and outward-looking as a consequence. They might well start wondering how can they explore further their own creativity as a group, and who else would be interested in what they have to say and show. A natural development from the sessions is to make a small exhibition which others can enjoy and which will demonstrate the life of the group. The exhibition could include memories, photos (both past and present), drawings produced during the sessions and perhaps some objects that the elders have brought in to share with the group. Some people may worry about their more personal experiences being shown publicly and it is important to let them decide on any cuts or edits. It is enjoyable creating an exhibition together and can develop the group's confidence and sense of achievement.

Another means of sharing the reminiscence work with others is to develop a short entertainment of stories and songs recalled by the group during the sessions. The programme may need a compère or link person to prompt the performers, and this could be the reminiscence group leader or another group member. It can include some solo pieces for confident members and some songs to perform all together. Again, the individual members must feel comfortable with what they are sharing, and must have the right to cut out a story which leaves them feeling exposed in an uncomfortable way. Preparing an event of this kind is another way of strengthening positive feelings about the group and offering an opportunity for sharing with a wider audience.

Some groups enjoy making improvised scenes from the stories they have told, and these can be threaded together into an informal piece of theatre to share with others. This approach is becoming more popular as groups realise

what fun this can be, and that no previous acting experience is required. The scenes can remain improvised, so that people do not get nervous about learning lines and so that the spontaneity of the performance is preserved. There is scope for comedy here, and also for moments of sadness as people convey more complex memories. Songs can be interspersed to help the group move easily from one scene and one mood to another.

Working towards a festival for sharing of memories can be an excellent way of galvanising the energy of the groups concerned. It can enable them to focus on what is important to them to transmit to others who may be from different cultures or different generations. The process of preparation must not be too pressured, and it must not become a competition between the groups. As long as the spirit behind the event is one of co-operation and celebration, a festival can be an ideal means of generating creative reminiscence work that will improve the quality of life of all participants.

REMINISCENCE WORK ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

Sharing stories from different generations and cultures with children from different in a classroom or community centre can be a powerful way of creating inter-cultural and inter-generational understanding. It is very important in such meetings that the older person is well prepared and supported, and that the teacher has done some background work with the children and created a respectful atmosphere.

There are many benefits to both generations. Older people enjoy the energy, enthusiasm and playfulness of children, and often reconnect with these qualities in themselves. Elders who visit classrooms to talk about when they were young, often find they can remember the songs and dances of their childhood and pass these on to today's children. They are often surprised themselves at how their lives are so interesting to children in schools, especially if their own schooldays were not marked by success, and they become more confident as a result. When teachers and children use these inter-generational encounters as a basis for creative work in the classroom, the resulting displays of art, drama and creative writing are extremely gratifying for the older people involved, who feel that their lives are being recognised and celebrated.

For younger people it often comes as a revelation that the older people in front of them were once young like them, but in a different world. They soon recognise that there is much more to older people than just what you can see in the present and treat the elders with much more respect as a result. Young people's understanding of life in the past, and the changes that have occurred, can be deepened by listening to the first hand testimony of older people. These accounts can be verified and expanded through curriculum work in geography and history, including information searches through libraries and on the Internet.

There can be further educational, social and cultural benefits when the stories of these "time witnesses" are explored in the classroom through drama, art

and creative writing. These creative approaches help the children to relate what they have heard to their own experience of life, and make greater sense of it.

Cultural transmission across generations:

One of the main motivators for ethnic minority elders in participating in reminiscence sessions and oral history recordings is the desire to pass on their own culture and life experience to younger people from their own background. It is therefore important to offer this possibility to elders who express an interest in reminiscence, as well as providing them with the pleasurable opportunity of talking to others of their own generation.

For children and grandchildren of immigrants, a sense of personal and community history is especially important in building self-esteem. Older people have a very positive role to play here, re-enforcing a cultural legacy, passing on personal stories and customs, and stimulating children in their communities to be interested in their own families' histories. By making bridges between generations and cultures in the classroom, ethnic minority elders can play their part in increasing social cohesion and understanding.

It is important that all our children have some understanding of why Britain is a multicultural society today. When older people from the Caribbean, for example, explain to children how they came in the post-war years to work in nursing or public transport or heavy industry when the 'mother country' was crying out for help, it assists children to understand the bigger changes in society and how they are affected by them. They can see history as something that happens to 'ordinary' people as well as great leaders, and indeed that it is 'ordinary' people who can make change and change history.

Other countries' recent histories are different from ours, but are significant for us, and need to be reflected in curriculum work. We hope the stories in this book, and the suggestions for exploring them through creative activities, will be of help to teachers and students alike.

Much has changed in the way schools study history, geography, society and religions, especially in urban multicultural classrooms. There is now a great deal more acknowledgement of diversity, and of the educational value of accepting difference as a means of combating racism. The richness and variety of the pupils' family backgrounds are increasingly being recognised as a resource that cannot be over-looked. The grandparents and great grandparents of the children have important stories to tell.

GROUP REMINISCENCE WORK WITH ETHNIC MINORITY ELDERS

Inter-cultural work:

Not all elders find themselves spending their later years in the company of people who share their language and culture, especially if their work or their family attachments have involved them in moving away from London, Birmingham or one of the other big cities. They are likely to be sharing a day centre or sheltered house or club room with old people born in Britain, or

coming from many different parts of the world. Reminiscence can be very beneficial as a means of bringing out the things these old people have in common with their neighbours, and enjoying some of the special and different stories of their own lives. Group sessions can be a means of opening up communication, creating understanding between people from different cultures in the present and stimulating all concerned.

Working through interpreters:

Where elders do not share a language with the people they are living with, this can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation. One of the Chinese storytellers in this book discovered this, living as the only 'foreigner' in a sheltered housing complex in Kent, where he moved to be near his son. In this situation, the reminiscence group leader will need to make special arrangements for translation, so that elders from minorities can be included and there can be an inter-cultural exchange in the group.

Here are some places to start looking for help with translation:

- The obvious place to start is with the family of the person concerned, in case there is a child or grandchild living close enough to come in for these sessions. This has the great benefit of enabling the younger relative to discover more about their own history and to be of service in helping the older person settle into the group and find their place.
- An advertisement in the local press may attract someone in the area who speaks the relevant language and who would be willing to help on a voluntary basis or for a small fee.
- Social services departments and health authorities offer translation services and may be able to help as an extension to their existing services or know of a volunteer or family member they have called on in the past.
- A local language school may have attracted students from the home country of the elder concerned and they might be willing to help over an eight week period during their visit to Britain, and this would be helpful for the group leader and give an extra sense of purpose for the student.
- The local college or university may have students with the relevant language who may be pleased to offer a couple of hours a week on a fixed term basis as part of their community service. A small payment may be necessary, but the benefits would be considerable to the older person, the group leader and particularly to the student.
- a local employment agency may know of suitable candidates.

Make sure that any interpreter involved in a reminiscence session has an idea of the purpose of the group, and really translates everything the older person actually says. This may sound obvious, but some interpreters are more used

to obtaining factual information, and may not be clear about the need to translate the feelings, doubts, regrets and joys which are linked to those facts. If they become part of the session and see how the group leader is offering openings for self-expression and creativity to the elders, they will want to give much fuller translations.

Preparation and background reading:

The reminiscence group leader who wishes to include people from different backgrounds in their sessions should prepare a little. It is not necessary to spend a great deal of time reading around and researching, but it is helpful to have some background to draw on to encourage conversation if the older person needs prompting. It is reassuring too for the older person if they gather that the group leader is genuinely interested in them and their background. Given this support and encouragement, the older people themselves can be the guides to their own country, its recent history and its culture. Here are some practical ways for group leaders to prepare:

- Find a map (through the local library or off the Internet) which locates the home country of the elder in relation to the rest of the world. Is it an island or part of a mainland? Is it mountainous or flat? What is the nearest big city or landmark which some of the rest of the group might know?
- If possible find images of the home country, again either through the local library or on the Internet, so the elder has a starting point and the other group members can form a clearer picture of the person's homeland and their journey to Britain.
- Find out a little about the history of the country. Does it have historical ties with Britain through a colonial past? Or was there a conflict in the home country that led to the older person seeking refuge in Britain? This does not need to be very detailed information, but enough for the group leader to be able to deal sensitively with issues which may crop up in the group.
- Check the religious background of the individuals involved, and find out the key beliefs, observances and festivals of that religion. When discussing childhood and marriage in reminiscence groups, these subjects are likely to arise, but they can also offer a starting point for a reminiscence session. Again, this knowledge will be helpful in finding common threads, such as festivals of light in the winter months and harvest festivals when the crops are ready.
- Try to find a couple of objects which are specific to the culture of the person you wish to introduce to the group, so there is a starting point. This could be through a local market or museum, or through a cultural centre in the area. It could even be a fruit or vegetable which is grown and cooked in that country. Maybe the older person will have something themselves, an object or photo from their homeland or from their early days in Britain, which has a story attached to it.

- Try to have some one-to-one communication with the older person before working with the group. Visiting the person in his or her present home environment is often the quickest and most fruitful way of finding triggers for reminiscence, but this may not be possible. In any case, if there is some connection and relationship established it will ease introduction to the group and help to create confidence and trust all round.

Same language groups:

Even in a group where all the members share a faith or a language, it is likely that they will come from many different regions and very varied social and educational backgrounds. They will have many stories to tell one another about their lives back home and their experience of settling in Britain. The reminiscence process highlights the uniqueness of each member's experience and generates mutual interest and appreciation. There will also be knowledge and experience in common, and group leaders can call on this to develop feelings of group solidarity.

Comfort in sharing a common culture:

Singing and dancing together to the music of the home country is an obvious bonding activity, just as it is in any other reminiscence group, but with the added power of bringing a remembered faraway place alive in a very different present. Reminiscence sessions that include the preparation and sharing of traditional foods can be particularly successful, as smells and tastes are powerful means of evoking memories. Asking some group members to bring along their traditional costumes can stimulate discussion about the important people and occasions in each person's life and about the special designs and fabrics associated with the places where they grew up. In the activities sections of each chapter there are suggestions for specific activities to explore where people have come from, the major journeys in their lives and the adjustments they have made.

Moments of reflection:

Some reminiscence sessions should have a quieter atmosphere, with people sharing memories with just one other person in a confidential way, sympathising with and understanding one another's more painful feelings and memories. They can then decide, perhaps selectively, to share what they have been remembering with the whole group, and begin to explore their stories creatively together. However, it is important to remind people that it is up to them to decide what to share, and that personal privacy will be respected.

A sense of belonging:

At the end of a session of exchanging memories, people should feel that they have expressed what they have in common and acknowledged each individual in the group. "What a special and interesting collection of people we are!" is a common response to a lively session, and that is why reminiscence can develop people's personal confidence and increase their sense of belonging.

