

Unlocking memories — the use of reminiscence therapy

Have you ever noticed that a particular scent could bring forth a rush of vivid memories? The smell of cookies baking might remind you of spending time at your grandmother's house when you were a small child or a piece of jewelry given to you by a loved one evokes feel-good memories every time you wear it.

As humans we often attach memories to items or things that are a representation of an experience in our lives. Simple objects like a photograph, bracelet or even a cookbook can become resonant conveyors of meaning through their connection to an event in our lives.

Remembering the past can bring lots 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 have dementia, it is a way to talk comfortably about things they do remember.

Reminiscing has taken place since the beginning of time through the storytelling of family histories across all nations. Today's 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 have dementia are more confident about socializing and using their verbal skills.

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

Helps to communicate

Reminiscences therapy is an excellent way to increase the capacity to communicate with people who have dementia, it alleviates depression, increases self-worth, improves self-care, increases a sense of belonging and helps cope with aging. It also provides an excellent opportunity to get to know someone on a more personal level.

Reminiscing with older adults can provide comfort, reassurance and at times humor.

If you are a care provider, reminiscence therapy offers unique opportunities for the care recipients and caregivers to have positive growth experiences. In the process of sharing memories, care recipients achieve a sense of integrity and self-worth which can reinforce coping mechanism with aging and their current status.

This experience also helps the caregivers have a better understanding of the care recipient's needs and humanize the care recipients. The caregiver's ability to better communicate and understand care recipients can give the caregiver tools to provide better and more efficient care.

Preparation

Therapy sessions may consist of individual or group settings or take place during everyday interactions and activities of daily living. Preparation begins with selecting an activity to do and of some topics to discuss during the session. Some topics may require a little online research beforehand.

A physical prompt or prop is useful in telling the story. Pictures, a vintage toy and books are some examples. You should ask questions related to each topic, but try to remain flexible and let the conversation take its own path. Remember these items are there to get everyone talking and help engage the senses that can further trigger memories and stimulate more life review.

A favorite reminiscence activity of mine is baking. This activity helps stimulate and engage the five senses: taste (Grandmother's recipes), smell (aroma of fresh-baked cookies, vanilla extract), touch (textures of oats), sound (cake mixer) and sight (cookies, ingredients).

Engaging in this type of activity — making a product — will give the care recipients something to do so they can talk. If you are worried about using a hot oven with someone with dementia here is an example of a reminiscence therapy with “no bake” baking.

Before the therapy session have a trial run. This will help you get a better idea of how long this will take and you will have plenty of goodies to share with others or something to munch on while waiting for the cookies to cool.

Ingredients needed

Original recipe makes three dozen

2 cups white sugar 1/2 cup butter 1/2 cup milk 3 tablespoons cocoa powder 3 cups quick cooking oats 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Items needed

These can also be used as tangible items

mixing bowl spatula measuring spoons pot to melt butter in wax paper

gloves

Directions

1. Mix together sugar, butter or margarine and milk in a saucepan. Bring to a boil and cook for one minute, stirring constantly.
2. Remove from heat and mix in cocoa, quick oatmeal and vanilla. Drop by spoonful on waxed paper. (Cut individual wax paper for each resident and write their names on it)
3. Chill

Tips: It's better that you melt the butter on the stove yourself. While the butter is melting allow the person with dementia to participate by measuring and mixing ingredients; only help if the individual asks

you to. You can also bring some old pictures of food or baking items from the '20s or '30s. Any items to help evoke some memories — could be old cookbooks, wire whisks, baking pans, cookie cutters. Set these out on the table and allow the person with dementia to look and ask them to share stories about the time they cooked or helped in the kitchen