
Reminiscence Therapy: Utilizing Past Memories for Mental Health

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Introduction

- In reminiscence therapy (RT), patients recall positive experiences and memories from the past, via props and prompts.
- It's a beneficial treatment for older adults (OA) with memory loss or depression and can help foster a sense of well-being.
- While RT is usually done in group settings, this Fact Sheet will introduce some key features that can be incorporated into brief office visits and taught to caregivers for use at home.

Why Do Reminiscence Therapy?

1. **Boosts Cognition:** RT reactivates long-term memories and sharpens mental skills, especially beneficial for those with dementia or mild cognitive impairment.
2. **Lifts Mood:** RT brings back joyful memories, enhancing mood and emotional well-being, perfect for overcoming feelings of depression.
3. **Builds Connections:** When RT is delivered via group sessions it encourage sharing and bonding, reducing loneliness and fostering a supportive social network.
4. **Strengthens Identity:** RT helps maintain a sense of personal identity and continuity over time. Reflecting on past achievements and life events reinforces a sense of self and personal history.
5. **Encourages Closure:** It offers a chance to reflect on life's journey, resolve old issues, and impart wisdom, contributing to a sense of closure and personal fulfillment.

When to Use Reminiscence Therapy?

- **Early Stages of Dementia:** RT can be helpful in the early stages of Alzheimer's dementia (AD), where it can help with cognition, depression, activities of daily living, and quality of life. Patients with mild-to-moderate AD are most likely to benefit with the use of photographs, videos, and music that are linked with their personal past experiences (Cuevas PEG et al, *Int J Ment Health Nurs* 2020;29(3):364-371). It's less helpful in late-stage dementias.
- **Depression in Older Adults:** RT has been shown to promote life-satisfaction and alleviate depression in meta-analyses (Xu L et al, *Front Psychiatry* 2023;14:1139700).
- **Social Isolation:** RT in group settings can help OAs form new social connections and reduce feelings of isolation.
- **Major Life Transitions:** RT is useful during changes like retirement or moving into assisted living, helping individuals navigate and reflect on these shifts.
- **End-of-Life Care:** In palliative care settings, RT can provide comfort, facilitate life review, and help individuals find meaning and peace in their final days.

Essential Tools

These tools can be used during appointments or taught to caregivers for use at home.

1. **Memory Boxes:** Ask caregivers to create a personal memory box for the patient, filled with small, meaningful items from their past. These can include photographs, letters, mementos, or other objects. During a short session, one item from the box can be selected for discussion, while the patient is guided through the memories it evokes.
2. **Themed Conversation Cards:** Develop a set of cards each representing a different life theme (e.g., family, holidays, hobbies). In a brief session, the patient can choose a card and share memories related to the theme. This can spur spontaneous conversation and reminiscence.

3. **Playlists:** Music can be a powerful trigger for memory recall. A short session might involve listening to a song or two from the past and discussing the memories they bring up.
4. **Photo Albums:** Encourage caregivers to organize photo albums with labels and short descriptions. Flipping through a few photos can effectively trigger memories and discussions within a limited timeframe.
5. **Story Prompts:** Prepare a list of story prompts or questions tailored to the patient's life history. A prompt can be as simple as "Tell me about your first job" or "What was your wedding day like?"

Training Caregivers

1. **Empathy and Patience:** Emphasize the importance of showing empathy and being patient. Encourage caregivers to listen attentively and validate the patient's feelings and memories. Focus on positive memories. Recommend avoiding arguing with or contradicting the patient during memory recall.
2. **Guidance on Tool Use:** Provide clear instructions on how to use each tool and technique. For example, demonstrate how to select a photo from an album and use open-ended questions to encourage the patient to share memories.

Sample Questions to Provoke Reminiscence

- **Initiating the Session**
 - "Today, let's take a trip down memory lane together. Is there a particular time in your life you'd like to start with?"
 - "I noticed this photo/music/object seems to catch your interest. Can you tell me more about it?"
- **Encouraging Detailed Recollections**
 - "That sounds like a special moment. Can you describe what that day looked like?"
 - "How did you feel when that happened? What do you remember most vividly?"
 - "Who was with you at that time, and what was your relationship with them like?"
- **Validating Emotions and Experiences**
 - "It sounds like that was a really important time for you."
 - "I can imagine that must have been very challenging/exciting for you. How did you manage?"
 - "Your feelings are understandable."
- **Navigating Difficult Memories**
 - "If this memory is painful and you'd rather not talk about it right now, that's okay. We can discuss something else or take a break."
 - "It's brave of you to share that with me. Would you like to explore how that experience has shaped you, or would you prefer to shift to another memory?"
- **Connecting Past to Present**
 - "How do you think those experiences have influenced you today?"
 - "What did you learn from that time in your life?"
- **Closing the Reverie**
 - "Thank you for sharing these memories today. Is there anything else you'd like to add or a different memory you'd like to discuss in the future?"
 - "I've really enjoyed hearing about your life and the experiences that have meant so much to you."
- **Providing Support and Encouragement**
 - "You've lived through some remarkable times, and your stories are incredibly valuable."
 - "It's been an honor to listen to your stories. You have a rich history that deserves to be remembered and celebrated."

Clinical Scenarios and Responses

- **Scenario 1:** Mr. A, a retired veteran, often feels disconnected from his family, who don't understand his past. Using a memory box, his caregiver brings out medals and photos from his service time, asking about the stories behind each item. This not only stimulates Mr. A's memory but also provides a tangible way for his family to connect with his experiences.
- **Scenario 2:** Mrs. B has early-stage dementia and struggles with short-term memory loss. A caregiver uses themed conversation cards to talk about Mrs. B's favorite hobbies. Discussing her garden and showing pictures of flowers she once grew helps Mrs. B engage in the conversation, bringing her visible joy and a sense of identity.
- **Scenario 3:** Mr. C, who is usually withdrawn, has a deep love for classical music. A short visit involves playing a piece of music from his collection. This leads Mr. C to vividly recount seeing the performance live, showcasing how music can bridge communication gaps and stimulate memory.

Resources

Books

1. "Reminiscence and Life Story Work: A Practice Guide, Fourth Edition" by Faith Gibson focuses on the use of life stories and reminiscence in care settings, providing a practical approach to implementing these techniques.

Online Resources and Websites

1. Caregivers Activity Source (caregiversactivitysource.com/activities-for-elderly/remiscing-activities-for-the-elderly/): Contains many reminiscence activities that can be used with OAs.

Manuals

1. Age UK (ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-ni/documents/publications/best_practice_manual_creative_reminiscence_and_life_story_work.pdf): Offers a free manual on reminiscence and life story work, that includes information on reminiscence activities and therapy.
2. The Benevolent Society (singsandthings.weebly.com/uploads/1/5/1/8/15189526/remiscing-handbook-jan2006.pdf): Has a free and short Reminiscing Handbook, which contains many practical tips for incorporating reminiscence into work with OAs, including having successful conversations and creating memory kits.