

Finding the Fun in Dementia

How reminiscence can be a shared activity at home



This resource has been written by Karen Meenan
of Making Hay Reminiscence Theatre
in collaboration with Engaging Dementia



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Introduction

My name is Karen Meenan and I am the founder of Making Hay Reminiscence Theatre. In this booklet I share my experience of reminiscence and how it enabled my family to help my mother experience fun and joy in the years following her diagnosis with Alzheimer's. I also give guidelines and suggestions for how you might use reminiscence to support you to connect with the person with dementia in your life. If you have recently received a diagnosis of dementia in your family or if you are a carer and you want to get to know your client a little better, you might find some of the suggested shared activities useful to you.

My family's story

My mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2012 and died four years later at the age of 89. Our Dad had died very suddenly nearly 40 years before, so we were always very close to our Mam. She had always been a very vibrant, eloquent and capable woman, so when we noticed the early signs of her memory loss - that she was not quite following the thread of any conversation and was getting overwhelmed by small tasks - we knew that something significant had changed.

Even though she was very elderly at the time of her diagnosis, we didn't want to let dementia get in the way of her huge connection to us and her 13 grandchildren. Two of her passions were to sing and tell stories. My sister Órla Horn set up the Forget-Me-Nots dementia-inclusive choir for her and her neighbours and this has been an enormous success. From the early days of just a handful of members, there are now over one hundred people with dementia and



My Mam and Thembi her carer



Kathleen Tierney in her kitchen

their carers who travel from all over Northside Dublin to Baldoyle Community Centre every Tuesday morning.

From the early days of just a handful of members, there are now over one hundred people with dementia and their carers who travel from all parts of Dublin to Baldoyle Community Centre every Tuesday morning for the weekly choir practice.

When Mam died in June 2016, I returned to college to study a BA in Drama. As part of my studies I wrote a dissertation on 'Reminiscence Theatre' and spent a year interviewing people who had a background in dementia to learn more.

What is Reminiscence?

Reminiscence Theatre is described by world expert Pam Schweitzer as 'making theatre from memories'. In the early 1980s, talking about the past was still generally seen as something not to be encouraged amongst older people, since it implied that they were still living in the past and were encouraged to 'live in the now'. However, several decades later it is widely recognised that older people, particularly those affected by memory loss, can engage and communicate very successfully if the conversation sparks a memory from their past and they are given the opportunity to recall the details of that memory.

55,000 people in Ireland have dementia - over half a million families are affected by memory loss. Reminiscence is the practice of improving communication with older people by engaging them in conversation using sensory stimuli as triggers to spark memories. Talking about the present can be very stressful for people with short term memory loss. Reminiscence is a way to comfortably travel back to the older person's past and allows them to share their memories of life when they were younger.

Many older people, particularly those with memory loss can become isolated and depressed. When you introduce some sensory stimuli like Old Spice Aftershave or Lavender Talc, you are inviting the older person to return to when they were younger, and in so doing you are re-activating their senses and



allowing them to engage in the shared activity you are about to undertake. According to Dr Jeanette Golden, Consultant Old Age Psychiatrist St James's Hospital, there are two factors to be considered when communicating with people affected by memory loss and they are 'Involvement' and 'Mastery'.

'Involvement' is described as when the older person is fully engaged in the activity so it is important that your older person is involved in this activity with you and not just watching you being busy. 'Mastery' is when you encourage the older person to remember how to do this task, for example baking or painting and that makes them feel useful, contented and involved. The activities in this workbook are ones that I used to engage my mother and stimulate a conversation when her mood was below par. A friend of mine used to bring the old tool box to her Dad when his mood was low and he would spend hours handling old hammers and sorting out spanners according to size.

In reminiscence workshops I introduce random objects such as perfume/after-shave (smell), clove drop sweets/cod liver oil (taste), hits from the 40s and 50s (sound), old photographs/postcards (sight), silk headscarves/tweed cap (touch) and begin a conversation with a question like 'When you were young, how long did it take you to get ready to go out, and where was your favourite place to go on a Saturday night?'



Where to Start

Find something that the person used to enjoy in the past that can be re-introduced at home. If you are a family member it is a little easier to find ways to re-connect. Try to remember the things that the older person used to do well or had a particular interest in. If you are a carer and have just been introduced to your client, you need to take on the role of detective! Look for objects that give you clues about the person's life story and what they enjoyed doing in the past.

When communicating with a person who is living with dementia, it's important to remember that it can take them time to listen, process and respond. Try not to ask too many questions at once as this can put them under pressure to respond and cause distress. Instead, use open-ended comments like 'I wonder what hobbies you had when you were young'. Rather than questioning the person, have your detective work done so that you can generate a conversation by saying something like 'I believe you used to work in a clothes shop', this way giving the person a clue and providing the basis for a response. Remember - reminiscence is a fun exercise so try to find the things that you will enjoy doing together.





The importance of social roles

It is important to consider the social roles that a person has now and in the past. Social roles include the person's roles in the home and community. Traditionally in Ireland, there were distinct activities associated with men and women. There was also a "marriage bar" in Ireland between the 1930's and 1950's, which meant that women had to leave paid employment after they got married. The aim of the marriage bar was to encourage the wife to focus on household work and child rearing. Society reinforced the message of the marriage bar and so the wife or mother was often called a 'housewife' and the husband or father the 'breadwinner' of the household. When planning reminiscence activities with people who were married in Ireland between the 1930's and 1950's, it would be worth bearing in mind the roles and responsibilities that were expected of them at that time, and the types of activities they might have been involved in. Activities such as cooking, cleaning, baking and sewing were traditionally associated with women, and DIY and outdoor tasks with men.



Food preparation

Let's begin with food. Food preparation can be an enjoyable activity that taps into people's retained skills and abilities. It can also provide a person with an opportunity to contribute to the daily tasks in the home. For many people looking after older relatives, or for carers whose job it is to mind older people who are living at home or in a nursing home, food is an integral part of the day. Unfortunately, food can often be presented on a tray and the older person is passive in the process. They might even be left to eat their meal alone while the carer or family member avails of this opportunity to attend to other chores like washing up or cleaning the kitchen.

People who have been presented with food on a tray for a long time might very well enjoy preparing vegetables and cracking eggs again. A simple place to start might be to give the person a potato peeler and a potato and ask them to help you to prepare the food. Even if they choose not to engage in the activity, they might like to talk about all the potatoes they've peeled in the past and how a meal was not a meal without a spud! The aim is to give the person the opportunity to use a skill they have and contribute to the mealtime. You are enabling the person to be actively involved in household activities. Once you have introduced simple tasks like peeling potatoes and carrots – if a person has significant difficulties, even one carrot might be an achievement – you can enjoy eating the food together and let the person know that you welcomed the extra help in the kitchen

The kitchen

The kitchen cleanup is a regular part of daily life and provides opportunities for activity and interaction, as well as maintaining a person's motor skills.

As you are filling the dishwasher or putting away dishes, you might talk about household chores – a 'who did what' conversation. Many older people love to talk about the routine of what life was like when the twin tub was overflowing or nappies were boiling. Reminiscing with them about how they ran their homes, on often very limited income, is a way of allowing them to feel very proud of what they achieved without modern conveniences like dishwashers, washing machines and tumble dryers. The main purpose of this reminiscence activity is to allow the person to go back to a time when their role was respected and valued.

Baking

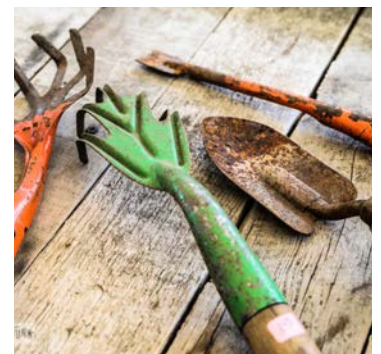
Baking is invariably a pleasant experience. Even if a person doesn't want to engage in baking, they may enjoy watching you sift flour, measure ingredients and whisk eggs, and you can both enjoy the cakes straight from the oven! While the cakes are baking you might look through old cookery books and ask what they liked to bake in the past, keeping an eye out for the pages that are splattered with cookie dough and cake mixture as they are likely to be favourites. Christmas is a time of tradition – ask if there was a special family recipe or ritual for making the cake, mince pies or pudding. Try to frame tasks so that they are failure free as the person can then achieve success more easily. For example, use familiar utensils rather than electric whisks and food processors, which are less familiar and can make the task seem overwhelming or unpleasant.



Gardening

Traditionally in Ireland, gardening was associated with the man in the home. The husband or father wasn't expected to do a lot around the house. The garden might have been his responsibility, or a shared one. Ask questions about the garden – was it a chore or a pleasant escape? What parts of gardening were preferred – weeding or planting? This can spark a lovely discussion about favourite flowers and trees. Were there half filled-jam-jars to catch the wasps in the summer? Did they leave out bread to feed the birds in winter? Follow this chat with a laptop or iPad and try to engage your older person in a conversation about what they would plant if they were to design their ideal garden. The garden shed was often a locus of activity. The Men's Shed Movement taps into this, providing men with the opportunity to engage in DIY and other activities, and facilitates social connection for men in the local community. Friendships are formed working alongside one another while doing something that is meaningful.

The garden shed can be a rich resource for reminiscence activities. Locate the tool box in the person's home and start with simple tasks like replacing a bulb on a small lamp which can be brought over to where they are seated. Start your own men's shed – at home!





DIY

Don't wait until a bulb blows to introduce this indoor activity - just remove the one that works from a table lamp and provide a new one in a box for them to open, inspect and be sure that it is the correct wattage. This can start a conversation about energy saving bulbs versus the electric bulbs they are likely to be more familiar with. Older people are often very in tune with energy conservation and waste management. You might start a conversation about recycling and packaging. The chances are that they grew up in a time when eggs were sold singly and there were no plastic wrappers on food items.

Spend some time exploring the toolbox, discussing whether maintenance was a chore or something relished at the weekend? Did they prefer working outside in the garden, dead-heading roses, clipping hedges or inside putting up shelves and hanging pictures? If you find old tools in the shed or garage, bring these into the house and discuss their uses. If there isn't a shed, go online and google vintage tools websites. You can look at the images together and start a conversation. Sometime an image is all you need to spark a memory.



“Make do and mend”

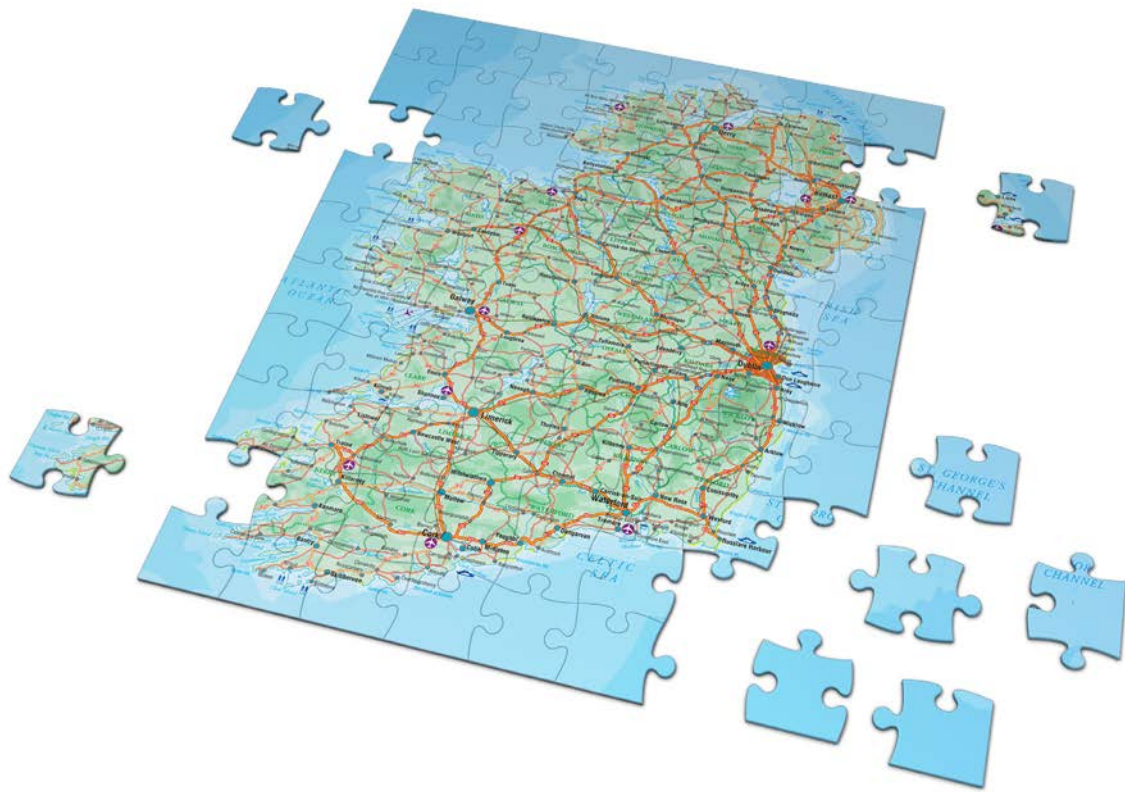


‘Make do and mend’ is a familiar expression for many older men and women, as they often repaired rather than discarded broken household items.

Locate the sewing box and find a few shirts that have a button missing or a hem that has come down. The hardest part for older people is to thread needles so invest in a needle-threader to avoid frustration. Sewing sets are very inexpensive and widely available in discount stores and cost less than €5.

Tasks like repairing punctures were commonplace. If you find a bicycle repair kit in the house, talk about their days on the bike. Did they offer crossbars to their pals, did they go on holidays by bike? Did they go youth hostelling or have an An Óige membership? Who did they go on holidays with? Take notes while they tell stories or record on your phone so you can remember the details for another day.





Once you have started these reminiscence sessions, you can introduce some pastimes. Jigsaws are a great way to work together if the older person doesn't really want to chat. Second hand jigsaws are readily available in charity shops for a couple of euro.

Turn this into an event - a short walk to the local Charity shop to buy second hand trinkets is a lovely outing. This jigsaw was bought in a charity shop for €2 and started an animated conversation about stamps, letters, invitations, Christmas Cards and saving the stamps which didn't get franked for another day! Another jigsaw of a map of Ireland started a conversation about holidays. Ask your local charity shop to keep jigsaws behind the counter for you so you have plenty to choose from when you make your visit. If you return the jigsaws after making them, you'll have another excuse for a trip to the charity shop - reduce, reuse, recycle!



Crafts

In the past skills like knitting and crochet were taught in school and while a conversation about school days might not spark very fond memories (times were different then) they might still like to try their hand at some small project. I bought an Animal Crochet set in a discount store for €5 and it included a crochet hook and knitting needles.

The hardest part might be reading the instructions. A simple way to override this is to take a photo with your phone and increase the font to make the instructions easier to follow. Start with a very simple project of knitting different coloured squares which you can decorate with buttons or ribbons and work up to more complicated projects as you both gain confidence.

In their youth, at school, older people were often taught to knit gloves and socks on four needles. Once the person masters the tasks of plain and purl knitting again, they might want to have a go at knitting on four needles again! If you find old knitting patterns in a drawer, have a chat about complicated patterns about Aran Sweaters, even if they weren't good knitters in the past, their parents or a family member might have had this skill and they will delight in telling you those stories. Use the internet to find some old knitting and sewing patterns. They can be a great way to spark a discussion about fashion and styles.





Painting

Everyone can draw and everyone can paint! All children love to paint, but as we get older we lose confidence in our ability to do this task well, so the joy is taken from what is a most enjoyable way to spend a wet afternoon! These sets are widely available in discount stores and stationery shops and are a wonderful way of expressing ourselves without anyone judging the content! Set up the table with lots of newspaper and paint brushes, and paint together. You might put on some music and paint to the rhythm. This is an especially nice task to do together if the person doesn't want to talk.

Music

If the older person has a record player, take out the LPs and have a chat about music! There are lots of LPs and singles in Charity Shops. Make this an outing and start up another collection – they cost a couple of euro per record so very easy to start a new collection and spark lots of music memories.

When you're considering what shared reminiscence activities you might do together, find something the person already likes to do. Start with a small task and remember that the point is to find something that you will both enjoy – reminiscence is a shared activity. Introduce these ideas slowly and make your way through the booklet until you find something that really sparks memories and chat – then you know you've hit the jackpot for your person!

While you are doing all of these activities, take notes so that you can record these in a scrapbook or notebook. Take photographs on your phone of the two of you sharing a common interest in cooking, baking, painting, gardening or mending. Get these photographs developed (most pharmacies will develop these instantly for a couple of euro) and then you can stick them into a scrapbook.



Memory Book or Scrapbook Making

Starting a scrapbook or memory book is a great way to reminisce about the past and record the present. Start this off by filling up the first few pages with the photographs of shared activities – a nice photo of the two of you baking or painting is a lovely way to start off your book. Once you have filled in the first few pages it can be less daunting to fill in the rest. Don't worry about trying to make this very beautiful or getting it into chronological order, this doesn't have to be a work of art or a project that somebody is going to grade – just have fun with it!



Include old photos and items you might find in drawers such as invitations, theatre programmes or restaurant receipts. Each of these treasures holds a memory. Gather the memories into a book which you can then take with you. One couple I know brings their scrapbook with them to the table while they eat lunch, so that if the conversation dries up the scrapbook can be used to start a chat. Another couple have created several scrapbooks and filled them with the drawings and paintings that they have created together.

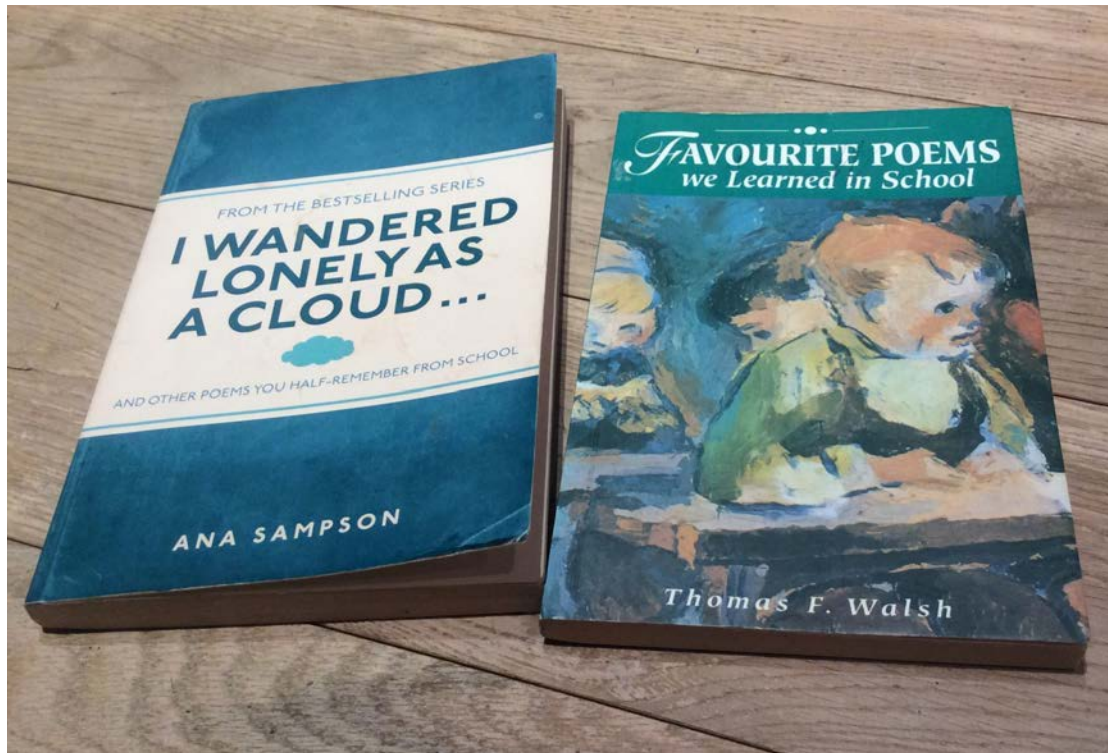


My mother's memory book

Reading aloud is another lovely way to pass the time with an older person, audio books are great, but having a story read to you while you lie in bed with your eyes closed is very soothing, especially if the story is a familiar one. Reciting poetry with and to your loved one is especially good – often the poems were learned off by heart, so your older person might be able to recall some of the poems they learned in school. There are plenty of poetry books in your local library or charity shop – ‘Favourite Poems we Learned in School’ is an ideal resource or google the first line and enjoy the half-remembered poems from your own school days.

My mother was a great story-teller and loved a good yarn. As her illness progressed, she lost some of her shyness and was always game for telling a tale with plenty of detail and would happily recount stories of her early life. She had many skills and memories from her childhood and youth and enjoyed using them. For example, she remembered all of her Irish Grammar and would spend hours teaching Thembi, her African carer, the ‘cúpla focail’. As I witnessed her ability to reminisce and recollect with absolute clarity the small details of her early life, and yet forget all recent activities, I set about creating a ‘memory book’ for her to help her and us gather all these priceless memories.

This memory book was inspired by Maeve Binchy’s ‘Lifestory’ which I had bought for Mam many years before she got Alzheimer’s. When I initially began to gather her “memoirs”, she was very reluctant to do it with me. However, ten years later when she had lost all short term memory, I reproduced the book and her response was very different. She and I spent many happy afternoons reminiscing and harvesting her stories. Sometimes I recorded her stories on my phone and typed up the conversation



afterwards, other times I wrote the answers directly into the memory book.

I gathered old photos from family members living at home and abroad and collected these into a photographic memory book. These photos were randomly presented, so that a photo of Mam as a small girl could be next to a photo of a grandchild at the same age. We had great fun finding family resemblances and talking about the fashion trends throughout the years. These memory books were very special indeed and allowed us to prompt a conversation with Mam when all other conversation had ceased.

And that was the point. By collecting these stories and photos, we allowed her to remember her own past and share it with us again. She was the expert on her own 'Lifestory' and never forgot the details. During the last few months of her illness when she couldn't speak or communicate very well, she still had great joy looking at the pages of these memory books. And as a family, that brought us great comfort, especially at the end.

Final thoughts

I hope you found this booklet useful and find reminiscence as valuable a tool as my family did when we were supporting our mother through her experience of dementia.

Reminiscence can be a wonderfully enjoyable activity and, in my experience, can truly help people to stay connected and continue to find fun in life even when a person is living with dementia.

The guidance and suggestions I have shared with you are just the start. Feel free to add your own ideas and develop your own set of reminiscence activities with the person in your life who is living with dementia. Find out what the person likes to do and have fun learning about what makes them happy. Enjoy!





This booklet was written by Karen Meenan, of Making Hay Reminiscence Theatre in collaboration with Engaging Dementia.

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About Engaging Dementia

The logo for Engaging Dementia, consisting of the words 'Engaging Dementia' in white, sans-serif font inside a red speech bubble shape.

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Engaging Dementia is a registered charity that provides training and resources for those who care for people with dementia in residential care, day centres, hospitals or the family home.

Our training services are primarily for the staff of nursing homes, day centres and hospitals. Our resources are suitable for both formal and informal carers. We are involved in a range of community-based initiatives focused on supporting communication and engagement for people with dementia.

Engagement is at the heart of what we do – we believe in and promote the value of engagement through communication, music, the senses, the creative arts and the outdoors. Engaging Dementia continually explores new ways to support care centres to provide high quality dementia care, and to support family carers, in order to enhance quality of life for people living with dementia.

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Home Instead Senior Care Ballsbridge are proud to sponsor the production of this valuable resource. Through information and education we can all have a part in helping people to live well with dementia. www.homeinstead.ie

