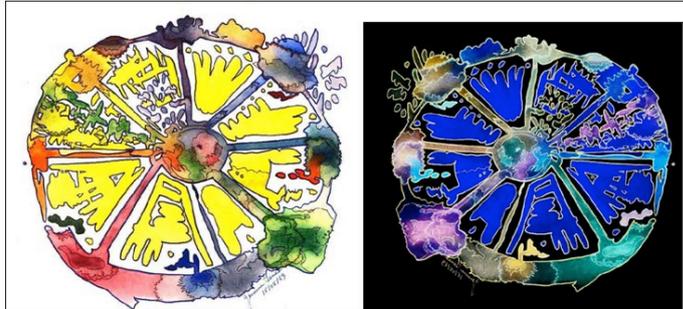


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TAD (Thoughts About Dementia) Newsletter
By: Dr. Gemma M. M. Jones



TAD 70 5 July., 2021
**The 'Ten plus communication options model':
Option 3 - Reminisce**

Related ideas for observations, reflection and research

- Did you ever notice a person with dementia becoming more expressive and confident while telling you a story about the past (reminiscing) - compared to when just speaking with you about social pleasantries?
- Can you relate to the pleasure of reminiscing from your own experience?
- Do you have a mixture of funny stories, poignant stories, adventure stories and family stories that come to mind more often than others
- In how many ways, and for how many purposes have you reminisced with others you know or work with?

Dear Reader,

This TAD expands upon Option 3 of the 'Ten plus communication options model' for dementia care, **reminiscing**. **Box 1** gives a brief summary of the model. (See the previous TAD newsletters for details of the models and options one and two ¹⁻³.)

Box 1 Summary of the 'Ten plus communication options model' (Jones, 1985)

- 1 Gather information**; ask 'good' questions to find out the person's story
 - 2 Orient** the person to what's happening, explain 'the facts'
 - 3 Reminisce**
 - 4 Distract**, directly and indirectly
 - 5 Agree**; play along with
 - 6 Lie** – told to make a person feel better, but a lie none the less
 - 7 Social response**; superficial, safe topics
 - 8 Validate** (acknowledge) the person's feelings
 - 9 Idle**, stall for 'thinking' time; remain quiet; repeat last thing person said
 - 10 Combinations** of the above options - used consecutively
- Plus Humour (with provisos), and other options**

Note that '**becoming defensive**' and '**trying to show the person you are right and they are mistaken**' are NOT options in this model.

Communication Option 3 - Reminisce

There are *many* purposes for using reminiscence as a communication option, according to its various functions. Clinical psychologist, Betty Anderson, did research on reminiscence in a long-stay hospital, in 1984. She distinguished between personal and interpersonal functions of reminiscing. Many have contributed to the reminiscing field, much of it relating to biographical work with elderly people, but also involving adaptations to reminisce with people with dementia⁴⁻⁸. So - I've expanded Betty's original list in **Box 2**.

Box 2 Some of the purposes of reminiscing

The purposes of reminiscing include:

A – personal functions - for the person with dementia

Reminiscing used to:

- be able to speak about what one remembers best - since distant memories are easier to retrieve and talk about than recent ones
- help reinforce one's identity and life story
- to talk about facts
- to talk about the emotional flavour or events, or express one's feelings about them

B - interpersonal functions - for the person with dementia and others

Reminiscing used to:

- inform
- teach
- share life - especially dilemmas, triumphs and humour with
- share information about yourself with others
- to leave one's personal story behind as a legacy for family, other [history]

C External (to the person with dementia) functions - for others

Reminiscing used to:

- distract the person from something else happening (to avoid distress or discomfort to the person with dementia)
- try to assess the extent of a person's 'disorientation in time'
- try to orient a person to present time or recent events, in gradual steps, to see to what point the person can follow you.

An example of this latter use was given in TAD 69, where a daughter tried to see if she could get her Dad to recall memory of his wife's death from cancer. The daughter managed successfully to help orient her Dad for some months. She did this by reminiscing about specific facts, such as:

- that his wife had been diagnosed with cancer and in hospital

- she then returned home

- her bed had been moved to the living room

- when she became worse, she went to the hospice, and died there.

When he could no longer remember the progression of events, she stopped trying.

The reminiscing purposes shown in Sections A and B of Box 2 are pretty obvious. It is the purposes in section C that will mostly be highlighted hereafter.

Example 1 - reminiscing with a resident who wants to cook for her children

This example shows a caregiver using the 'reminiscing option', in favour of the 'orienting' or 'lying' options.

Notice how she does the opposite to what most people would do. Instead of trying to distract the lady immediately, by avoiding the topic of cooking and children, the caregiver reminisces with her, about these very things, until the lady is finished talking about them. She neither agrees nor disagrees with the lady but encourages her to reminisce. In effect, she only distracts the lady, after she is being distracted by tangents in her own reminiscences.

Mrs V, a widowed lady who lives in a care home; is in Behavioural Stage 2;- she is permanently disoriented in time. Sometimes she thinks she's at home with her parents, or, a mother of three children; at other times she realizes she's old but "not a day over seventy". Mrs V doesn't remember that her children are grown up. She speaks of cooking for them, but it's 10pm and a caregiver wants to help her to bed.

[Lady] It's been nice seeing you, but you'll have to leave dear because the children are coming home and I have to cook for them.

[Caregiver] [Being short-staffed, the caregiver decides she is unable to leave and return later, so she decides to continue the conversation, hoping to be able to distract Mrs V – after she has let her talk about what she wants to do. That inevitably involves reminiscing about cooking, the children, and the responsibilities of being a parent.]

How many children do you have?

[Lady] Three hungry ones – I swear they have hollow legs - every one of them!

[Caregiver] What do they like to eat? Have they got a favourite food?

[Lady] Yes, they like anything with chips, but that not what they're getting.

[Caregiver] What were you thinking of making for them?

[Lady] Meat and veg – the usual – nothing fancy.

[Caregiver] Do you like cooking?

[Lady] No, not really, but 'needs must' - so I get on with it.

[Caregiver] How did you learn to cook?

[Lady] Not from mother – that's for certain. She was a terrible cook. Luckily we learned some household things at school, so I've always gotten by, but I can't say as I enjoy it.

[Caregiver] Did any of the children help you to cook, or did you do it yourself?

[Lady] Not really, they're always so busy. Susie likes cooking but has no patience for it.

[Caregiver] Did anyone ever cook for you?

[Lady] You must be joking! They don't help with the housework either, ...but that's kids for you.

[Caregiver] [The caregiver is noticing how Mrs V is taking part in the conversation. She decides to give her non-verbal signals about getting ready for bed as they continue speaking. She walks over the bed, folds down the sheet. She takes the nightgown from under the pillow and holds for Mrs. V to see as she walks toward her.]

Yes, that's kids. And Mums often get the brunt of the housework, even if they work outside of the house as well. Did you mind working so hard?

[Lady] [Mrs. V starts to undo her cardigan.]

Sometimes it gets you down, but mother worked even harder – very hard.

[Caregiver] Did you ever have a little cat-nap in the afternoons?

[Lady] [Mrs. V continues undressing.]

Yes, sometimes I have a little doze after coming back from the shops.

[Caregiver] You've done a lot today, are you ready for a little doze now?

[Lady] Yes, that sounds like a good idea.

[Mrs. V keeps talking as she gets ready to go to bed.]

[The scenario ends here - for our purpose.]

[Note: Notice how the caregiver speaks using 'past tense' to reminisce, yet - as is typical of people in Behavioural Stage 2- the lady responds in present tense.]

Other purposes for using reminiscing – including 'distraction'

If, as in Example 1, you have to accomplish something *related to the care* of the person with dementia, and want to keep the emotional tone pleasant, reminiscing for the purpose of distraction can certainly work. Other purposes include:

- trying to get 'the facts' about someone/ something - if possible
- letting a person express the 'emotional flavour' of something that happened to them (even if they can't remember or express 'facts' correctly anymore)
- encouraging someone to speak - to participate in the activity of talking – and feel included, regardless of their ability-level to verbalize intelligibly.

Example 1 shows a special type of reminiscing - universal reminiscing -

There is a type of reminiscing, which Feil called 'universal reminiscing' ⁹. It involves speaking together, as equals, as wise and experienced adults who have survived thus far. All adults know these things - but children don't.

'Universal truths' that adults know include things like:

- 'children often can't see danger'
- 'children don't always listen to their parents and adults'
(For example, they may not wear their coat or dress warmly enough when they're having fun outside', even though they've been told to do so.)
- 'you can give youngsters advice but often they don't take it'
- 'it can be very difficult to discipline children'
- 'life isn't always fair'.

This type of reminiscing together is often both poignant and humourous; it puts both people 'on the same level' in the conversation, on the level of being 'experienced, wise adults', regardless of one person having dementia.

['Appropriate humour' is perhaps the only other communication option that can also do this ¹⁰.]

What happens to reminiscing ability in people with dementia?

In terms of the Memory Bookcases Model - as 'factual memory ability' starts to decline, emotional and sensory memory will become more dominant. (If you're unfamiliar with the term 'factual memory', see the articles on Bookcase Model of Memory ^{11,12}). Just because a person cannot *tell* you 'correct facts', does not mean that they are not remembering something (a person, object, or event) *at all*; they may be experiencing some form of reminiscing through their emotional and sensory memories. They may also be limited or unable to express this.

To the surprise of everyone who hears it - sometimes people who cannot speak in sentences anymore, - during lucid moments – express thoughts and memories, assumed to be long forgotten.

Triggers can aid reminiscing

Very little is known yet, about how we retrieve memories, fairly reliably, over the decades as we age. One surprising thing that happens with age, is that memories we haven't thought about for many years - and don't even know that we still have stored somewhere - just seem to 'pop up'.

Sometimes, there are obvious triggers for them; at other times they seem to arise spontaneously. Using concrete triggers, (including objects, sounds, music, tastes, smells, images, sensations, and movements) - even just *conversation about them* - can help some people to reminisce.

The next TAD covers Option 4 – 'distract'. This has been just touched upon a bit in here.

In the meanwhile,
Best regards,

Gemma Jones

P.S. An interesting observation:

Although with most types of dementia people reminisce better about 'distant memories' than 'more recent memories', there are some exceptions - as has sometimes been seen in people with - Alcohol-related dementia, some locations of strokes in vascular dementia, and some locations of brain tumors.)

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