

Activity: Staying healthy

Create a life story book

It is important to see the person first and the dementia second. This activity is designed to help a care worker to get to know and build a relationship with a person with dementia. A life story book can provide endless opportunities to develop conversations and communication that is helpful to a care worker, the person with dementia, family members and friends.

Everyone has a story to tell and it can be great fun to discover it. A life story can be created in a number of ways. The most common is to create a picture book made up of key memories, events and relationships that are important to the person being cared for.

The first step is to encourage a person with dementia to talk about their life. An easy way to get started is to look at different times in a person's life (school, teenage years, their 20-30s, middle age and present day). Gaps can be filled by talking about key events (such as growing up, family, work, hobbies and interests).

The book can be created with the help of personal or generic photographs that represent important milestones – and fun times – in a person's life. If personal pictures are not available (say the person tells you about a great holiday in Blackpool but has no photographs to look back on), a postcard or picture from a magazine of Blackpool Tower or other landmarks can help as memory joggers. A picture can be accompanied by a few words about the holiday and the memories it evokes.

It's good to get a feel for the era the person grew up in, the kind of music and radio or TV programmes they liked, the cars they owned and the clothes they wore. Again, these can be represented in the book with the help of personal or generic pictures and words capturing the good times.

If a person has kept important items (such as a lock of hair) this can be put in the book and its importance explained. The book can be developed over a period of time and family and friends should be encouraged to become involved.

Trainer's notes

Creating a life story book helps a care worker to learn more about the person they are caring for and in developing communication skills. This activity works really well in the post-diagnostic period because it makes the person feel valued and have a sense of self-worth at a time when they may be feeling a range of negative emotions.

It also creates a valuable tool that can be used in a variety of ways as a person's dementia progresses (for example it can provide ideas for a conversation when communication and memory becomes more challenging). Knowing a person's musical and other likes can play an important part in helping the person to relax or smile.

The internet can be valuable in helping to source images and words of songs that may be important to a person with dementia. Memory boxes (containing items

important to a person's life) are another way to store keepsakes and trigger conversations and good memories.