

Saving the Mind's Grace

Use of Memory Triggers in Dementia



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*He meant, I think, that never should he now
Know the slow disgracing of her mind, the slow
Spiral of her beauty's deterioration, flagging desires,
The stagnant fury of the temporal yoke,
Grey temple, long slide into fat.*

Lawrence Durrell, *A Persian Lady*

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Summary

Dementia is a progressive loss of cognitive function that exceeds what is expected in the normal course of aging. It affects about one in ten Canadians over the age of 60 and is a major cause of disability and dependency among the elderly. Dementia is overwhelming for those who suffer with it and distressing for families and caregivers.

At this point in time, there is little that can be done to stop a decline in mental faculties caused by dementia; however, there are interventions that can provide comfort and perhaps slow memory loss. This paper looks at memory books—a collection of photographs, clippings, histories, and more—and considers how they may be an aid in coping with dementia.



Introduction

Memories define us, ground us, and give us history. Physician and philosopher John Locke maintained that our personal identity extends only so far as our memories; as our memories fade, so does our sense of self. More than 300 years later, we know that our identities are made up of more than what we remember, but our sense of ourselves is still tied to memory.

It is no surprise then, that losing our memories is a frightening concept. It implies we've lost touch with ourselves and with those we love and care about. We all fear it, and we dread it even more as we age. According to a poll done in 2008, one in four people in the general population fear losing their mind, and among those over 55, dementia became the most worrisome concern with cancer running in second place (Hope, 2008).

Our fear is not displaced. Worldwide, five to eight percent of those over the age of 60 will suffer with dementia. In Canada, dementia affects between five and fifteen percent of people older than 65. The incidence of dementia is lower among those between the ages of 65 and 74, but increases as we age. By the age of 95, about a quarter of us will experience the mental decline of dementia (Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2014).

There is little that can be done to stop progressive memory loss caused by dementia. However, a better understanding of the nature of memory combined with an evolving person-centred nature of care has led to a range of approaches to support those with dementia and their caregivers. These interventions can help to sustain memory, slow memory loss, and improve the mood and general well-being of those suffering with dementia.

One such intervention involves the use of aids to trigger memories. People with dementia can be engaged with photographs, newspapers, documents, and stories to help them recall their past experiences.



Talking about their remembrances keeps their minds active, helps to anchor them in time, and provides an opportunity for social engagement. The process of preparing a collection of memory triggers is an especially supportive activity for people in the early stages of dementia.

Collecting memorabilia and organizing them in a book with stories can also be a focusing activity for any person. Documenting a life of relationships, accomplishments, events, and memories is a legacy to be shared in the present and left behind for the future.

This paper explores the importance of memory aids, particularly for those suffering with dementia. The paper explains how we form and keep memories and how memory loss impacts us all. In that context, the paper proposes a therapeutic approach using memory aids to support people who are suffering memory loss.

Memory binds our mental life together. We are who we are in large part because of what we learn and remember.

— Eric Kandel

Memory Loss

It's common to forget things at all stages of life. If we're bored, tired, or depressed, our concentration may be poor. Our brains don't latch on to our experiences and write them into our memory. If we're busy, anxious, or stressed, our attention is scattered and, again, we may not form solid memories, so the experiences will be easily forgotten. Even if we have retained memories, our ability to recall them will be affected by exhaustion, stress, boredom, and mental overload. These are normal occurrences. Some people just have better memories than others.

Age can also lead to memory lapses. Our brains are a little slower as we age as a result of physiological changes. It takes longer to learn things and we sometimes struggle to remember details. In "senior moments," we draw a blank on the name of a favourite movie or an address. These mental glitches are a normal part of aging; the memories are there but we need an extra moment or reminder to access the information. Certain treatable medical conditions, such as under-active thyroid, vitamin deficiencies, and mental illness, can also interfere with our ability to remember things.

The most frightening cause of memory loss is any condition that leads to progressive and permanent memory loss. This type of memory loss, when it is severe enough to interfere with daily life, constitutes *dementia*. The most common and well-known cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, a process of nerve cell death in the brain. It is responsible for 60 to 80 per cent of the cases of dementia. Damage to blood vessels in the brain as a result of a stroke is the second most common cause of dementia. Other causes include Parkinson's disease, head trauma, and other less common diseases. The changes brought about by these diseases are almost always permanent.

Symptoms associated with dementia include difficulties with thinking, language, and problem-solving. It's also common for people with dementia to experience mood and personality changes. But the most worrisome symptom for most is memory loss. The symptoms begin slowly and gradually, often without a clear sign of when they started. Memory decline is insidious; it begins with forgetting where the car keys are and progresses incrementally, stripping away the ability to remember what happened recently and then what happened last week or last month.

Most people with dementia remember the distant past more clearly than recent events. This is because memory loss due to dementia declines in reverse order to the experience: the most recent memories will be lost first and the most distant memories last. People may not remember where they visited last week, but they can readily recall the details of a vacation they took several years ago. Then they may not remember the vacation, but they can recall childhood experiences. Eventually, even the distant memories will fade. In the later stages of dementia, people may not remember their own personal information such as their names or major life events, and they may no longer recognize the people closest to them.

It's a poor sort of memory that
only works backwards.

— The White Queen to Alice

Lewis Carroll

Coping with Dementia

Dementia triggers a number of changes for both those suffering with dementia and those who care for them. As mental abilities decline, individuals with dementia lose the capacity to learn new information, make decisions, and perform daily tasks. In the early stages, they may get lost easily, and by the later stages, they may be unable to recognize the world around them. As dementia progresses, those affected require more assistance with day to day activities and, eventually, often require constant supervision and care.

Communication also becomes increasingly difficult as dementia advances. Initially, the challenge will be remembering information relevant to a conversation, then the challenge will be following the flow of conversation. As dementia progresses, those affected may become confused about the conversation, unable to understand the topic, or unsure of who they are speaking to. Eventually, they lose the ability to access language and can no longer communicate at all.



Those affected by dementia are also known to become easily irritated or moody and even depressed. They may become restless, agitated, and even resistant to interaction. The cause may be physiological—a result of neurological changes in the brain—but is as likely the result of anxiety, confusion, and frustration. A decreasing ability to interact with other people compounds these frustrations and thus adds to behavioural changes.

Dementia also affects family members and friends. They are increasingly tasked with care while also adjusting to their loved ones' behavioural and mood changes. Communication becomes more difficult and the ability to maintain relationships breaks down. It's common for caregivers to feel overwhelmed and helpless in caring for their loved ones.

Reminiscing

The science of memory is an evolving topic. Researchers consider what we remember, how we remember, how we recall memories, what we recall, and what influences or changes what we remember and recall. There remains much to be learned, but what is known is how we form and store memories.

When our senses feed information to our brains, the hippocampus and associated areas deep in the brain process the information and encode it as signals between an infinitely tiny subset of the 100 billion neurons in our brains. Those signals are the basis of memories. Initially, the memories are short-term and fragile. We can only hold a few items at a time in short-term memory and the memories only last a few moments. To hold the memories longer, our brains manufacture proteins

that firm up the signals between neurons. Over a period of time, our brains then move the package of signals that form our memories to the outermost layer of our brains, the cortex, for sorting and storage. Once in the cortex, memories last hours, days, years, and a lifetime.

The diseases that cause dementia affect areas of the brain in stages. The first areas to be damaged are the hippocampus and associated areas responsible for creating memories and holding them for the short-term. Thus, the early signs of memory loss are typically associated with an inability to form a memory. This is why, for example, people with early stage dementia will forget where they put their keys down. As dementia advances, its damage spreads, destroying the packages of signals making their way to long-term storage in the cortex.

Generally, dementia progresses by taking out memories in reverse chronology; however, memories are not destroyed in precise order. The packages of signals making their way through our brains move at their own pace, strengthened or weakened on their route to our cortex as our brain chemistry fluctuates. Similarly, the brain damage associated with dementia, while progressive in an overall predictable pattern, advances organically and in stages on its various routes. Overall, however, short-term memories are lost first and long-term, well-consolidated memories last.

Reminiscing used to be considered a sign of feeble old age, but now that we understand the process of memory better, we've come to realize that reminiscing is a means of engaging with our sense of selves and with others by relying on the memories that serve us best: the older ones, tucked away in our cortex for long keeping. In the 1960s, psychologists began to consider the therapeutic importance of recalling memories as we age. Experimental studies indicated that reminiscing improved mental functions and self-esteem, so by the 1970s, "reminiscence therapy" had become an established practice in psychotherapy.

Reminiscence therapy continues to be an active form of treatment, especially with the elderly. Recalling and reviewing memories from their past can help individuals establish continuity with current changes, easing distress associated with transitions. Reminiscence therapy also seems to help strengthen social relationships and improve mood. Not least among the benefits is an overall engagement and joy with the process. Studies reveal that an overwhelming majority of those using reminiscence therapy enjoy talking about their experiences and listening to others. They report general improvement in their daily life and a desire to continue with the process (Lin, 2003).

Memory is identity. ... You are what you have done; what you have done is in your memory; what you remember defines who you are; when you forget your life, you cease to be, even before death.

— Julian Barnes

Reminiscing and Dementia

While the methods and effects of reminiscence therapy are difficult to standardize, participants and those who care for the elderly agree that recalling past events is a good thing to do (Woods, 2005). Reminiscence therapy is known to maintain or improve self-esteem and life satisfaction for the elderly in general. For those with dementia, recalling and talking about the past seems to have particular value:

- Talking about the past capitalizes on remaining strengths—engaging with long-term memories—thus generating self-confidence.
- Engaging memories reminds individuals of the significant events in their lives, helping them retain a sense of who they are.
- Sharing stories from the past offers those with dementia an opportunity to be social, engaging in communication with others, and, thus, improving or at least sustaining relationships.
- Recalling stories from the past helps to establish continuity with the present, providing individuals with a sense of control in the face of current changes.
- Telling stories is pleasurable and serves as an enjoyable activity for both those suffering with dementia and their caregivers.

Memory Aids

We not only store short-term and long-term memories differently, but we also recall them with different prompts. Short-term memories are stored and retrieved sequentially. If we are given a list



of grocery items to remember, we are more likely to successfully recall the list if we start at the beginning of the list rather than try to recall the item half-way down. In contrast, long-term memories are stored and accessed by association. Association can be with any number of things such as events, items, photographs, places, smells, or sounds. Conversely, any of these items can trigger memory recall. For example, catching a scent of orange blossom might bring to mind memories of a trip to Central Park in the spring when the orange blossom trees were in full bloom. Triggers will also evoke connections with the people, events, and emotions associated with the recalled memories.

For those who are suffering with loss of memory, triggers can be an invaluable aid for calling forth slipping memories and launching reminiscences. Music is a particularly effective trigger not just for evoking memories but also for orienting, anchoring,

and calming people with dementia (Clark, 2009). Familiar smells are also good at eliciting memories, and visual items such as photographs, letters, and mementos can be valuable triggers.

Photographs and Histories

Photographs and histories are particularly helpful memory triggers because they can be collected in an easily managed format, shared with others, and used as reference devices. If time and opportunity permit, collecting photographs, certificates, family trees, newspaper clippings, and anything else

that's relevant into one or more books can be an invaluable project. These memory books are also valuable legacies to be passed along to other family members.

Those in the early stages of dementia may find that gathering the materials and creating a memory book is an anchoring activity. Both in early and later stages, a memory book can also be created as a shared project, providing a reason and focus for ongoing social interaction with others. The process of creating a memory book together can also trigger reminiscing, improving recall and articulation of memories. Later, the book can be used over and over again to trigger memories, help people suffering with dementia remember names, and remind them of their significant life events.

There are several journals and binders available that have been designed especially to become memory books. Typically, they are made up of a number of pages with prompts to generate memories. The aids contain questions about genealogy, friends, marriage, education, and other events and information that make up personal histories. Pages provide space to write answers as well as post photographs and other memorabilia. Blank journal books, sketch books, and binders are creative alternatives, although they do not include the prompts and guides.

Starting a memory book while memories are still active is ideal, but even if an individual's memory is very frail, a memory book will be of value. Really, a memory book is a worthwhile project at any stage of life. We tend not to save or review as much when using technology for storage, but we will pull a photo album off the shelf and review it over and over again. Children, for example, will often refer to family photo albums and repeatedly ask for the same stories to be told. Memory books feed that insatiable need in all of us to be connected with our lineage and our stories.

The appendixes to this paper provide further information for preparing memory books. Appendix A consists of a list of possible materials to include, and Appendix B offers tips and suggestions for dealing with the practical aspects of making memory books. If, however, the project of compiling a memory book seems daunting or even overwhelming, consider using a service that will prepare memory books for you. Some companies will interview the individual facing memory loss, family members and friends, and write a history. Other services will sort, restore, and compile photo albums. Yet other services will combine photographs with histories. Consult with community support groups and disease-specific organizations to see if they have a list of recommended professionals who archive and build memory books.

Men wrongly lament the flight of time, blaming it for being too swift; they do not perceive that its passage is sufficiently long, but a good memory, which nature has given to us, causes things long past to seem present.

— Leonardo DaVinci

Conclusion

Suffering a permanent decline in mental faculties is a frightening prospect. Losing our memories especially raises fears about no longer knowing ourselves and those we care about. However, reminiscing—a normal activity of recalling long-term memories—helps to slow memory loss and refresh fading long-term memories. Because our long-term memories are recalled by association, anything

connected to the memories can be used as a trigger to facilitate reminiscing. Photographs, documents, clippings, and histories are especially useful triggers because they serve not just as memory aids, but also as references that orient people, places, and events in the present. Photographs and documents also lend themselves well to being collected in a book that can be easily moved, reused, and referenced. Collecting photographs and documents, writing histories, and gathering the mementos together into a memory board or book can also be a wonderful opportunity to share an activity and foster social connections with someone who is coping with memory loss.



Appendix A: Items for a Memory Book

Use the following list of suggestions as a starting point for collecting items for a memory book:

- Photographs of family and friends, pets, homes, work places, and favourite locations; photographs from special events and vacations; and any other photographs that elicit a memory of something in the past
- Birth and marriage certificates. Death certificates can also be useful additions, both to prompt memories of the deceased person and, when appropriate, to orient the person with dementia to the present.
- Newspaper clippings of important events, community stories, and announcements
- School reports, projects, certificates, diplomas, and awards
- Military records, medals, and letters
- Personal correspondence, greeting cards, invitations, and announcements. Envelopes can be helpful in identifying people, places, and dates.
- Baby books, church or synagogue records, family books, and photo albums
- Résumés
- Ticket stubs, playbills, theatre programs, and concert listings
- Plane tickets, postcards, travel pamphlets, and anything else that might have been saved from a vacation or trip

Appendix B: Tips and Suggestions

While not exhaustive, the following list offers considerations for collecting memorabilia and preparing a memory book:

- Start with quality paper that will withstand repeated and potentially rough use. If using a binder, consider placing each page in an acid-free protective sleeve. Acid-free sleeves will not cause changes in the materials and will protect pages from spills, oils, and other small disasters.
- Scan photographs or have copies made to use in the memory book. Store the originals in an acid-free storage box.
- Consider having old photographs digitally restored by a qualified image editor. The original photograph will be left intact and can be preserved in an acid-free storage box while the digitally restored reproduction can be used in the memory book. Restored images are usually easier to see as well.
- Copy certificates and documents with a colour photocopier or, for a more legible copy, scan the documents and make a print on photographic paper. An image editor can also help you with this task.
- Ensure any books, albums, paper, tape, stickers, or glue used are made of archival materials that are acid-free. Anything else will cause photographs, clippings, or documents to yellow, age, and deteriorate.
- Solicit help and involve other family members.

About the Author

Stories & Company creates photo albums, e-books, and memory books. The services are provided by Dawn Oosterhoff, a writer/photographer with extensive experience writing travel memoirs, stories, and plain language communications. Her interviewing skills and 10-year background in clinical nursing help to surface memories and organize them into stories that can be retold again and again.

Dawn is also a document and image designer, experienced in preparing books for small press publication and e-publications. Because she does book layouts digitally, clients can elect to have more than one copy of a memory book made. This is an ideal option for families who wish to have their own copies of memory books or give some as gifts.



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