

Recalling memories: taking a collaborative community approach

A museum's mission is to be at the heart of the local community. Carly Hearn, development officer at Lowewood Museum, gives an insight into the creation of memory boxes—which when used as part of reminiscence therapy can help reconnect a person with their identity

Have you ever visited your local museum? Do you know what services they provide for older people? Lowewood Museum in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, is one of many museums playing a supportive role to residential and nursing homes, providing outreach work which uses their collection of local history material in productive and meaningful ways. Earlier this year, the museum launched a set of memory boxes containing nostalgic objects—such as Punch and Judy puppets, sunlight soap and a school milk bottle—for local care homes and community organisations.

Memory boxes are often used for reminiscence therapy, helping to reconnect a person with their identity and to improve communication, mood and overall wellbeing. Reminiscence therapy encourages social interaction by giving people the opportunity to share stories and experiences through a fun and stimulating activity. It also helps to bring together people of different backgrounds and generations, often helping to improve relationships between carers and the older person. The Cochrane Collaboration Review on reminiscence therapy for dementia included 144 participants, and suggested that reminiscence therapy improved cognition, mood and general behavioural function (Woods et al, 2005).

Lowewood Museum is not alone in conducting initiatives such as this. Many museums across the country offer memory boxes which are often free to hire. These easy-to-use, low-cost boxes, filled with objects capable of jogging the memory, can have a significant impact on someone's wellbeing—and evidence has also shown that reminiscence therapy can also significantly reduce care-giver strain when family carers are also involved (Thorgrimsen, 2002).

Joint reminiscence work, involving people with dementia and their family care givers, is a good example of relationship-centred care (Wood et al, 2005), and evidence has shown that reminiscence therapy can assist in the reduction of depression in older people without dementia (Bohlmeijer, 2003). Involving carers and older people without dementia in both the development and delivery of the boxes was vital for Lowewood's project, as from the

outset it was essential to recognise the central role played by volunteers and carers in nursing and residential care. With the ever increasing demand on care home staff, the museum offered a base for community groups to work together, producing a set of memory boxes which they could take ownership of, helping to promote to more individuals.

For Lowewood's project, volunteers from the Lea Valley University of the Third Age (U3A) were recruited to help develop the boxes, working alongside staff from local nursing home, Quantum Care's Belmont View; flexi care and independent living provider, B3Living; Vision4Growth, an organisation for those who are visually impaired and speech and language therapy group, Cheshunt Aphasia. Together, they helped to ensure the boxes met the needs of their residents and group members. By working with Vision4Growth and Cheshunt Aphasia, the museum ensured expert advice was sought for residents in care who had suffered strokes, or experienced other types of speech and sight impairment. All those involved received training from a reminiscence specialist on how to use reminiscence therapy in person-centred care.

The final result produced four boxes which incorporated objects from the 1930s onwards, appealing to both men and women, arranged in themes including *Home Sweet Home*, *Out on the Town*, *When We Were Young*, and *Happy Days*. Each box also comprised a support pack for care staff, which included cue cards for discussion prompts and feedback sheets for sharing reminiscence session ideas between care homes. Popular items within the boxes that have helped to unlock memories and stimulate discussions include cat's cradle, Dinky toys,

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Lowewood Museum's 'Home Sweet Home' memory box

a school milk bottle, Punch and Judy puppets, seaside postcards, dress and knitting patterns, sunlight soap, mens' razors and ladies' hair curlers. There was also efforts made to include more recent items from the 1970s and 1980s for use with younger residents and people living with early onset dementia. All items were relatively inexpensive, sourced online or through car boot sales and local donations. Within 3 months of their launch, the boxes have been fully booked by local care homes and community groups, used in reminiscence sessions by over 300 people. Lowewood Museum intends to build on this initial success to develop new reminiscence-based resources and support for care homes, including reminiscence sessions and coffee mornings at the museum and within the care homes themselves.

One of the Care Homes making use of the boxes is St Catherine's in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire. Activity and lifestyle facilitator, Carol Kerr, first used the boxes in a group setting, sitting with residents and selecting objects one at a time. Carol spoke of how the objects prompted many memories with the residents, with many stating, 'I had one of those' and 'I haven't seen one of those for years'. Carol also said:

'Some of our younger members of staff had never seen some of the items before and so it empowered our residents to be able to explain to them what their uses were'.

Carol went on to explain how the room was filled with laughter and how a lovely afternoon was spent reminiscing and sharing stories.

Carol also used the memory boxes with individuals in a quieter setting. Ellie, who is 87, prefers to sit in a quiet lounge and carers often find it hard to interest and engage her in any activity. However, when a member of staff walked into the lounge wearing an old fashioned apron, (or pinny as they called it!), Ellie threw her head back and laughed. 'I used to wear one of those' she said, and remained cheerful and was happy to look through the box. The staff found this very rewarding.

Lowewood Museum is not alone in their project to support nursing and residential care. Liverpool Museum's House of Memories project is another example of the role museums can play in supporting the work of health and social care staff. This award-winning training programme targets professionals, families, friends, volunteers and carers, providing skills and knowledge to help deliver a positive quality of life for those living with dementia. In addition to the training programme, there are a number of memory resources, activities and events including the 'My House of Memories' app, allowing people to explore objects from the past and to share memories. This unique app has been designed for, and with, people with dementia and their carers in mind. The app enables the creation of memory timelines, trees and personal profiles to be developed for different people.



Community residents from the Lea Valley U3A reminiscing at Lowewood Museum



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Joint reminiscence work, involving people with dementia and their family care givers, is a good example of relationship-centred care

Conclusion

Using memory boxes in person-centred care is an inexpensive resource offering meaningful results. With the ever-increasing pressure on care home staff to fulfil their daily tasks, it is perhaps their local museum who can offer support in the development of reminiscence resources. If you haven't visited your local museum, why not find out where it is, and see what they have to offer in terms of resources and support for your care home? A museum's mission is to be at the heart of its local community, as a main hub, helping to bring local people together—groups and individuals of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. Museums should exist as a place to offer the opportunity to explore and reconnect with the past, and subsequently can play a crucial role in supporting nursing and residential care homes with the objects they collect and the vibrant outreach work they offer. **NRC**

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Key points

- Care homes can benefit from working with museums in their local community, which can provide useful resources for reminiscence work
- Reminiscence therapy helps to reconnect a person with their identity, improving communication, mood and overall wellbeing
- Museums exist as a place to offer all individuals the opportunity to explore and reconnect with the past
- Reminiscence therapy is an inexpensive resource that can have a significant impact on someone's wellbeing. Residents may enjoy telling younger staff members about life in the past, and reminiscing can also impact on self-esteem
- Museums should be at the heart of their local community, helping to bring together groups and individuals of all ages, backgrounds and abilities
- If you haven't visited your local museum, why not find out where it is, and see what they have to offer in terms of resources and support for your care home?