



Information for Families - Activities in the Home

Life Story Book
Memory/Conversation Box
Sorting and Tidying



Alzheimer National Helpline
1800 341 341

Life Story Book

The creation of a Life Story Book is a significant activity for the person with dementia, family members, friends, and care workers. Life story books can help to preserve a person's sense of identity and give carer's an understanding and appreciation of that person and their life.

Why is it good to organise a life story book?

A person with dementia may experience enjoyment and validation from this record of his/her life story and achievements. The process of creating the book is in itself an excellent activity, which may provide stimulation and meaningful connection. It can also encourage better communication and an understanding of the person's needs and wishes.

Life story books can:

If a person becomes agitated or upset for any reason it can be helpful for a family member, friend or carer to sit with the person and look at this book together. Familiar material, photographs etc can be effectively used to reduce distress.

Family members and grandchildren can enjoy looking at a book that focuses positively on the person's life, reminding them of happier times and the contribution the person has made to family life.

This book can also help the person living with dementia to develop relationships with paid care workers and staff in nursing homes and hospitals, and can be helpful when designing individualised activities.

The creation of a life story book is a co-operative activity involving a person with dementia, a family member or friend and perhaps even a care worker. As family photographs and memorabilia will be used and a scrapbook or album must be provided, it is necessary to obtain consent from family members beforehand, including the person living with dementia.

Some families may not wish to disturb existing albums but may have some additional loose photos that could be used. In some cases families may not wish to disclose specific family history details.

Materials

- The Alzheimer Society have produced a Life Story Book, which can be purchased from their online shop at <https://store.alzheimer.ie/> or can be ordered by calling 01 207 3800
- People may prefer to use a scrap book or photograph album large enough to attach photos and insert labels underneath the photos
- Family photographs
- Memorabilia which has meaning for the person (postcards, old programmes, report cards, favourite poem or song)
- Small cards or labels to name all items in the book
- Adhesive for attaching materials in the book



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Preparation

Before beginning the work of putting in photos etc it is important to get an overview of the person's life. It may be necessary to record details of the person's life and check with family members for accuracy. It will also be necessary to look through old photographs and record the person's memories. This could take a number of sessions.

As most of us enjoy looking at our photographs and reminiscing about our lives, most people with dementia will also enjoy this activity. A family member or carer may even learn new things about the person. It is an exercise that can enable others to learn more about the relationships and experiences that shaped that person's life.

Labelling

It is important that photographs are labelled clearly. This will 'prompt' the person who, although still able to read, may occasionally forget some family members. It is desirable to have the person with dementia do the labelling with help. If the person is unable to write clearly, this can be done by others.

Please note

As with reminiscence work, an activity such as this can evoke a mixture of emotions for someone with dementia. Most people enjoy looking at old photographs and get satisfaction from seeing their **Life Story Book** take shape. However, some may become sad looking at photographs of their deceased parents, brothers, sisters or children. If a person becomes distressed it is important to respond by acknowledging the feelings of the person with sensitivity.

Knowing about people or incidents, which cause an emotional reaction, can help to support the person sensitively and deepen awareness of the person's past life. Any memory that holds negative connotations for that person should not be recorded as part of the life story.

It is also important to remember that some people with dementia might become a little agitated if they are unable to recognise faces and remember names of people in photographs. Photograph details should be checked with a family member before a session on the person's life story.

The Life Story Book can be divided into a number of different sections, not necessarily in chronological order. It could be divided according to the stages of the person's life.

- **Early years:** birthplace, home life, parents/grandparents, brothers and sisters, school, and pets.
- **School:** favourite subject, friends, interests, pastimes, sport.
- **Adulthood:** education, training, jobs, marriage/relationships, family, clubs, home, holidays
- **Middle Years:** family, grandchildren, pastimes, work life, travel, clubs and societies, volunteer work.
- **Later years:** family, life achievements, leisure activities, pastimes, travel, clubs and societies, volunteer work.

If it is difficult to get details of the person's life in chronological order the Life Story Book can be divided into different sections. The following are some suggestions- 'Favourite subjects at school', 'Christmas', 'Holidays', 'Memorable Family Events', 'Family Pet' etc.

The Life Story Book could focus on a part of the person's life that he/she remembers well. The person might remember the war years (the emergency) food rationing etc. Perhaps the person worked in the army and travelled abroad, or in a local factory, or worked for the local parish or sports club, or reared a family and remembers all the old ways of cooking and cleaning

If someone went to a family farm, or worked on the bog, or went to the sea for holidays, general farm and bog land pictures and seaside pictures could be added to the book.

Information Updates

The person with dementia may be living a full life after the diagnosis of dementia. The life story book can be kept up to date by adding photographs of people in the day centre, carers, special occasions etc.

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Making and Using Conversation/ Memory Boxes

Conversation/Memory boxes can stimulate conversation about familiar or long forgotten items. If a person with dementia is unable to converse about the items, they may enjoy the visual and tactile experience of looking at, feeling, and smelling them. They may enjoy taking them out of the boxes and at the end of the session, putting them back in the boxes.

Materials

- Make homemade conversation/memory boxes or bags e.g. shoeboxes for smaller items, large carry bags for items of clothing.
- It is better to have a number of different boxes with a small group of items such as clothes/shoes, household items, or childhood items, rather than one large box that will be cluttered and confusing.
- The use of different conversation/memory boxes will facilitate different conversations.

The following are items that could be included in conversation/memory boxes:

- Soap (e.g. lavender, Sunlight)
- Hairnet
- Mothballs
- Nylon stockings
- Marbles
- Stiletto shoes
- Sea-shells
- A straw hat
- Old tennis racquet or hurley
- Wraparound apron/ overall
- Tin of Brasso/Silvo

- Old jewellery
- Fly paper
- Wooden skipping rope
- An old wooden pencil box
- A scrubbing brush
- Old coins or notes
- Old copies of 'Ireland's Own'
- Old picture
- Old copies of Sacred Heart Messenger' etc.

How to use the items

- Take out one or two items at a time- too many objects can cause confusion and distraction.
- A person may take time to examine the object, feel its weight or texture or smell it.
- If possible have more than 1 box and use different boxes at each session

Sorting and Folding Items

When we sort materials we use our senses of sight, touch and memory. If dementia has affected a person's perceptual, organisational and logical skills, sorting in a systematic way might be too challenging.

However, it might still be possible for them to enjoy the visual and tactile experience of picking items up, exploring them and rearranging them. The person may also enjoy talking about the items.

It may be necessary to buy new socks, glove, towels etc. in contrasting colours and textures

If the person sorts items e.g. a specially created basket of socks/ gloves, towels, the person may feel he/she has helped with laundry. The sorted basket (evidence of the contribution to work) can be used to compliment and encourage the person.



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The following items can be sorted:

Take care with small and/or sharp items, such as buttons, coins and beads; if the person might put them in his/her mouth. It may be necessary to supervise this activity with some people.

- Screws and nails
- Stamps
- Pictures from magazines
- Keys
- Greetings cards and postcards
- Flowers
- Chessmen
- Beads and buttons
- Junk mail

These items can be stored in see through containers, boxes, jars, or bags (preferably plastic)

Tidying

Tidying and sorting handbags, drawers and baskets of items can provide good opportunities for conversation and remembering older times. People often also feel a sense of achievement when they have completed a task.

Some examples of things that can be sorted through and tidied include:

A specially created box of items familiar to, or collected by, the person

- A folder of cards, notelets, or stationery
- A handbag
- A wallet
- A small drawer
- A toolbox (Take care to remove sharp objects)

The Alzheimer Society of Ireland (ASI)

ASI have a range of information including our factsheets on

- Activities
- Maintaining skills,
- Engaging in Activities in the home,

We also provide a range of dementia specific services such as Dementia Advisers, Day Care, Home Care and Support Groups.

Freephone: 1800 341 341

Email: helpline@alzheimer.ie

Visit/ Live Chat: www.alzheimer.ie