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THE BOOK OF MY LIFE STORY: A WAY TO CREATE CONNECTIONS FOR RESIDENTS IN A BRITISH RESIDENTIAL HOME

Abstract:

The Book of My Life Story is a good way to make connections for the residents. It helps them to understand about their life style, hobbies, and professional experience. Memories about their past also help them to adapt in a residential home. Though the reminiscences day by day become greyer and some of them disappear, opening the Books of My Life Story, residents may remember what makes feel them more fulfilled and happier. Some memories may be sad, but that is also part of their life and helps them to go forward.

The Book of My Life Story is a symbolic bridge to the residents' hearts and minds. While talking with the carers and residents' families they agreed that the Book of My Life Story is a very positive thing, encouraging connections with the ones they care about.

The results of the qualitative research show that each part of the book is very important. The results stress that such records about their life before coming to the residential home, as well as the records about everyday life in the residential home, are useful for finding ways to communicate and cooperate with the residents.

Talking about the Book of My Life Story, positive emotions were stressed more often than negative ones. This means that this book is very useful in everyday life, trying to see the full picture of residents' lives. This helps carers to work in a person-centred way and to give the best services to the residents.

Keywords:

dementia, memories, my life story, person - centred care, residential home

Introduction

According to the statistics of the Alzheimer‘s Society “there are 850,000 people with dementia in the UK, with numbers set to rise to over 1 million by 2025. This will soar to 2 million by 2051 “(Facts for the Media. Alzheimer’s Society, 2019). This means that the number of people with dementia who need professional care increases every year and supports the argument that professional care must be provided for a higher number of people with dementia and their family members. This is why research in this field must be continued to find the best possible ways to help people with dementia and to give them the best qualified services.

The memory of people with dementia can be compared with the pages of a photo album: some pages have photos and some are empty, with no photos and no memories.

“As the number of blanks increase, the person finds themselves with more and more recent pages in their album where potentially crucial facts are missing…” (James, 2009, p. 42).

The roles of the carers, family members and friends are very important. The communication methods used with the people they care about are also significant. *The Book of My Life Story* is a very important instrument to find out what is missing and to renew some blank pages in the resident’s life.

“So long as carers understand the significance of their own actions and reactions, the personality of person with dementia can survive. In fact, when this does happen, everyone thrives” (James, 2009, p. 51).

Research object – the carers’ and family members’ reflections about *the Book of My Life Story* in a British Residential Home.

The aim of this research is to reveal the carers’ and family members’ opinions about *the Book of My Life Story* in a British Residential Home.

Research tasks:

1. To describe what a Book of My Life Story is.

2. To explain the carers’ and family members’ experience of filling in the Book of My Life Story.

3. To highlight positive and challenging aspects about the Book of My Life Story.

Methodology

The empirical research is based on the life-story approach and the results of good practice, which can be used as a guide in the life-story work process (Borton, 1990; McCarthy, 2011; McCormack et al., 2009; Rolfe, Freshwater, Jasper, 2001; Thomson, 2007; 2010; 2011; Warfield, Manley, 1990; Wayman, 2017).

Ten carers and two family members participated in the research. The research took place in a British residential home in the UK July 7, 2018 – February 7, 2019. The participants were 30-77 years of age. One research restriction was that the majority of the participants were female (10 females and 2 males). Two family members agreed to participate in the research and to give semi-structured interviews. The first interview took 30 minutes, the second one, 23 minutes. The participants' opinion was very important to get a fuller view about the Book of My Life Story.

The carers were given 6 open-ended questions; all of them received their interview questions in a written form. First they had to give their opinion about The Book of My Life Story; their experience filling in the book; about its most interesting parts. The carers were also asked about people who were involved in filling in the books. Finally, the participants were asked to name positive and challenging points of The Book of My Life Story.

The collected data was analysed using content analysis. The research results were presented as a text focusing on the research participants' ideas in the context of concrete practice.

Results and Discussion

Carers' and family members' opinions about the Book of My Life Story

The Book of My Life Story can be seen in many ways: as the portrait of the person that he or she was, the portrait of the person that he or she will become. It also gives many ways of approaching the person. A person is an individual, with no two people the same. The book also reminds people of the things which they liked to do. It provides a bigger picture of the person. The Book of My Life Story gives a portrait of the person as a whole, the entire life story of the residents from every point of view, a holistic point of view.

Having a bigger picture of a whole person allows care to become more targeted. While supporting residents it is very important to have a good relationship with them. Good connections between the carers and residents improve the quality of the care. This is why it is important to know what carers think about the Book of My Life Story and what impact it has on the care being provided. The participants' opinions are given below.

My opinion of the Book of My Life Story is that it is good thing, it will provide a goof insight to each individual client need and give a historical context to certain behaviours that a client may have [C 1].

It is a written document of the clients' past: growing up, hobbies, work history and family. Captured on paper as a reminder of years gone by. This is fantastic! [C2].

The Book of My Life Story is a good idea because it builds a relationship between staff and residents [C3].

The Book of My Life Story – a good idea, because it gives the opportunity to record moments and experiences that the client has and who reads the book will learn about it [C4].

It is really so helpful to us as carers to know a lot about our residents' past life and what they like, dislike, like to do, or what makes them upset and their interest. All these things can make our communication with them easier [C5].

Useful in knowing the clients, about their lives [C6].

The Book of My Life Story is very good way to know and understand residents. Also it makes residents to be happy, to talk about their own stories and to bring their memories back [C7].

I think it is a good idea... [C8].

The Book of My Life Story serves as a key to be able to connect to people with dementia. It is a way to establish rapport with people. It is a bridge to reach and understand them to ensure person-centered care is being provided [C9].

I think it is a very good idea to find out information about the resident you do not know much about [C10].

I think the concept of the Book of My Life Story is an excellent idea. It gives an insight into the residents' life. So they (people, who are involved in the care) can talk with them or sometimes knowing their background could give an insight if there was ever a problem [F1]. Very good idea [F2].

The characteristics of The Book of My Life Story according to the participants of the research are shown in Figure 1.

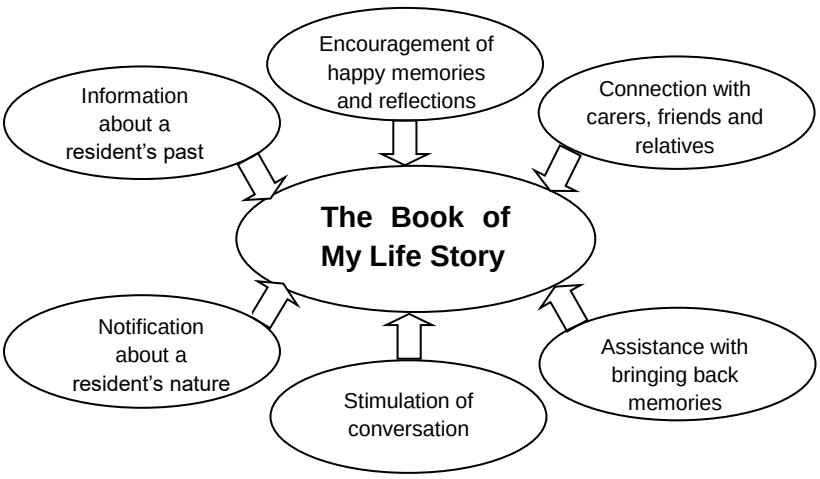


Figure 1. The characteristics of The Book of My Life Story (by author)

Experience of filling in the Book of My Life Story

Talking with the participants about the experience of filling in The Book of My Life Story, they referred to their positive, mixed and sad experiences, though positive emotions are mentioned more often than negative ones.

Here are some thoughts of the participants:

It gives me the knowledge and understanding about the person's life before and now. In some cases made me feel sad, some experiences made me happy [C4].

Fun, doing the books. The feelings were good and sad, talking about final wishes [C6].

Talking to residents or their relatives about past life, work, hobbies, travelling… Most of the time they are happy to talk about it and they have very interesting stories to tell. We could understand better our residents and to treat them as they like [C7].

It's very interesting learning about resident's past [C8].

It is meaningful and emotional. Emotional because the memory loss is indeed evident in them (people with dementia). Meaningful because the important information about them is being revealed for a cause [C9].

I had a mix of emotions compiling the book with memories and photos, but on the whole I felt it was a very worthwhile idea as ultimately it will help the staff to help my mother [F1].

Talking with the participants about the experience of filling in The Book of My Life Story, they stressed positive moments:

It made me happy to see the residents happy talking about their life experiences [C10].

It is very good, makes you look back at life, pick out its good bits [F2].

It is a good experience and I noticed that the client is so excited to talk about their previous life moments [C5].

The participants of the research expressed their sad feelings about their experience as well:

Also it makes me to feel sad towards some people who were all their life busy and building their own life and had a good position in the community. And now it is the end of their career [C5].

The book was a little bit difficult to find at times, this was mildly frustrating. My input was to add stories from the family and from the residents themselves [C1].

I feel sad because it is emotional to see their old pictures and life style that they once had [C3].

It can be a little challenging because memories sometimes may be good, sometimes may be bad, but trying to encourage a person to talk about his/her past can be a little bit difficult, but with the time a trusting relationship develops and the life story develops.

My personal experience with one particular person, this person used to work in the company as a clerk, something like that would be very fundamental to a person's memory.

There is another person, who used to work as a mechanic in a motorising team. Also he had many memories about the people he worked, he met. That was also quite interesting. Some other interesting example could be when one person stayed in an ice hotel.

One thing that springs into my mind that filling in the Life story book is stimulating [F2]. Mainly it stimulates memories. It is challenging to get them talk, but it is stimulating; many people have variety of experience. And all experience contributes to the whole person.

Positive and challenging aspects about the Book of My Life Story

It is stimulating since it gives another point of view of an individual client, of the whole person. It is challenging getting them to open up about their past experience, good or bad. You don't tell your life story to those whom you don't know or you don't trust. But such things like trust is built over time. It would be a symbiotic relationship. It gives you something to start a conversation. As the conversation progresses, it helps you to finish the conversation or to make the conversation a lot longer.

The Book of My Life Story helps carers to connect to the residents.

The Book of My Life Story helps to connect to the residents and helps them to reconnect with themselves. It helps them to remember whom they were.

If a person had good memories, this will help them to become more stable. It will help them to remember happy times, to reconnect with memories they have forgotten, maybe times with their families, with their friends, times with their hobbies. It is undoubtedly a good thing.

The challenges are more in the process finding the memories with individual residents. They may have more reluctance to someone they don't know or they met them only recently. They would be afraid to talk. The challenges are in the process. Talking to the person, talking about their past, the person may not feel comfortable and the process of building enough trust and talking about their past takes time.

Positive, strong sides of the Book of My Life Story

If my mom would like to look through it, it will bring back good memories. That could make her happy. It gives good ideas to discuss with her [F1].

It is a good record of the life so that the staff may get to know the resident better. It is good for the residents and family members to have talking points.

It brings good memories back and that is positive. Good reactions, it stimulates her instantly. She sees the pictures, she recognizes friends, relatives, cats that we had. It is good, because it stimulates her memory. She remembers some of the names.

It was easy, I enjoyed everything about the book.

If relatives come, they can take the book and talk about different thing with my mom. And they can find photos, pictures with themselves. It is a marvellous idea.

I put the new pictures, for example, about the wedding. We can talk with her about that.

Next time I will put the new photo. It is updating stage.

It is a good combination: events outside, like family events and events going inside. That is good and it is stimulation. The main thing [is] that it makes her happy [F1].

It is important to mention that it is very important to participate together, to be together with the family members while filling in the book.

Here are more positive points about the Book of My Life Story:

...it was very therapeutic, because it allowed me and the client to reconnect to their past, even if it was very briefly [C1].

It is great that the information is provided as they are not always in a position to relay that information themselves [C2].

That the residents are happy [C3].

It gives information that makes the carer understand best about the person's life and what they like or dislike [C4].

It is like a guidance for us (key workers) to deal with someone who partially or completely lost their memories due to their ageing process [C5].

Photos of them doing the things they love [C6].

Reminds, memories back. Also lets us better know and understand our residents to meet their needs [C7].

Maybe talking about their family [C8].

It prompts the memory of person so as the carer/staff can connect with them, especially at times conversation becomes a tool in providing person-centred care [C9].

Helps you to know about the residents before coming into the care home [C10].

I found it very positive to highlight the important events during my mum's life [F1].

The fact that it was there – very good [F2].

Challenges about the book

The most challenging part is the conversation with the residents about their past [C3].

It was challenging in the sense, that reconnecting with the past can be uncomfortable, e.g. some clients may have lived under Nazi occupation and they may not want recall some of this [C1].

Without information from relatives or friends, it is sometimes a disadvantage for the carers /staff in understanding the clients' needs and background [C2].

It should always be updated, added new life events, collecting lots from family members. But some residents have no families, that's the only problem, it makes difficult to collect correct data [C5]. Clients with no families [C6].

If the resident has problems with family and they don't come to see the resident often, so that brings some sad memories to the resident. Also, if no one to talk about resident's life, hobbies, wishes… [C7].

When people with dementia doesn't like to talk about their history, vis-a-vis relative cannot be reached [C9].

When you bring up to a resident of what you have read in their book and they don't remember [C10]. As they have various forms of dementia, their confusion [C8].

Naturally it was much thought-provoking writing and putting together photos, it was an experience... Some emotions are sad because some of the people are no longer with us... [F1].

The challenges are more in the process of finding the memories with individual residents. They may be more reluctant to talk to someone they do not know or whom they met only recently. They would be afraid to talk. The challenges are in the process. Talking to a person, talking about their past, this person may not feel comfortable because the process of building enough trust to talk about their past takes time.

Conclusions

1. The Book of My Life Story provides a foundation for residents, carers, family members and friends to continue to live in the present and to look at the future. It helps to honour the past, helps residents to have a more stable present and their carers can encourage conversations that make living with dementia more positive.

The Book of My Life Story is a useful tool because it can inform others about a resident's past; can give information about a resident's personality; it can assist with bringing back memories; encourage happy memories and reflections; to help make connections with carers, friends and relatives; it stimulates connection with the resident.

2. Explaining the participants' experience of filling in the Book of My Life Story they mentioned mixed feelings: some moments were sad, some moments were happy because people have very interesting stories to tell about their life.

3. The Book of My Life Story is a very valuable useful tool that helps the carers to connect to the residents and the residents to reconnect with themselves.

It is enjoyable, stimulating and also very necessary. It helps the carers to connect at the same time that it helps the resident to reopen his/her past.

The process of getting the resident to open up can be most challenging task, depending on the level of trust. It can be stimulating and enlightening; it can explain some past behaviour by the resident and may also establish put a new context of how you see the resident.

It creates a strong new foundation. A person without a history cannot feel like a person.

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