



SENIOR HEALTH

Prompting Memory: How to Stimulate Cognition

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Recently I gave a talk titled, *The Art of Memoir - Tapping the Past to Sharpen the Present* at a senior lunch event in Austin, Texas. I combined my current experiences of memoir writing, with some of the folksy wisdom I share in my classes, and with clients grappling with memory challenges. After I read passages about hilarious situations from my childhood in Cornwall U.K., four friends of mine at the event suddenly shared highlights from their own childhood. I learnt things about my buddies I hadn't known in over 20 years of friendship. My point at the lunch was to encourage anyone experiencing shades of "senior moments" to tap into the past as a way of sharpening current memory.

Folksy Wisdom

I advised everyone at the lunch to use post-it notes in assorted colors as memory prompts, utilizing a fun version of the Five Elements. "Vary the colors according to preferences," I added. "Attach post-it notes to highly visible spots - like the refrigerator door, mirrors, etc." I also reminded everyone that folks with extreme memory problems also responded to (often neglected) tasks like bathing if their favorite colors were selected for soap and towels.

We discussed fragrance as a potent memory prompt "Utilize favorite smells of fragrances from the past as much as possible," I said, and shared a recent NY Times story¹ about how the *Hebrew Home* nursing facility of Riverdale N.Y., crafted a baseball park kiosk with canned smells in a sequence of "press-and-sniff" buttons so residents could access familiar smells they loved from past Yankees games (popcorn, beer, hot dogs, baseball mits).



The exercise, along with a permanent "Yankees Dugout" exhibit of memorabilia including seats and a turnstile, brings joy and stability among Alzheimer and Dementia residents. This helps "stimulate their cognition" says Mary Farkas, director of therapeutic arts.¹ Baseball themes are also woven into art and pottery workshops, to rekindle the ballpark for Yankees fans among the residents, many of whom are from the Bronx.

Reminiscence Therapy

Bottom line—to overcome minor cases of forgetfulness or foggy brain, jump into some great memory from the past. Recreating the 1940s or 1950s has become an integral part of progressive programs for Alzheimer or Dementia residents in the U.S. and Europe. Examples range from rooms decorated with old movie posters and furniture, music, newspapers and dial telephones from the past in some centers, to post WW2 kitchens and a workbench in the memory care community at Edgewood Vista, in Mandan N.D.²

Recreating the tangible past has a stabilizing effect and also helps rekindle good memories. "Reminiscence therapy" even inspired the world's first "dementia village" in the town of Hogewey outside Amsterdam where everyone has dementia.³ A new town square cued by the 1950s opens this year in Chula Vista, near San Diego County Calif., where primary visitors will be from the local George G. Glenner Alzheimer's Family Centers who will literally "stroll down memory lane."

Music Past and Present

Music also works wonders for memory. Folks can forget who they are or where they live, but rarely forget how to play a musical instrument, or to sing. Prompting the non profit Calif. based MusicMendsMinds organization to launch an intergenerational jazz band Fifth Dementia.⁴ Musicians experiencing dementia still have all their jazz skills intact and they perform regular gigs

together with young musicians.

Memory and Pacing

One of my M.D. buddies in Canada who worked with a number of Alzheimer patients, trained in Shiatsu with us because she noted the calming and soothing effect of a non invasive and structured touch. She asked me to observe one of her patients "Carl A.," who paced constantly around and around a long corridor. Weight loss was becoming a serious problem. "What was his profession?" I asked.

"He was one of the city's main architects," she said.

"Ah, that explains a lot," I replied. "He's still wired into projects. Attach a large cork board to the wall at the end of the corridor. Pin up photographs of architectural drawings or city scapes and maybe some colorful cartoons or beautiful artwork to catch his eye, calm him down before he completes the round trip." She did. Family and friends and hospital employees would periodically swap out pictures or items from magazines to vary the colorful balance. It was a win-win situation. Not only did this modify "Carl A.'s" pacing, but it added beauty and humor to the corridor for all to enjoy.

Ending on a youthful note, author Sue Meck of Mass. experienced total memory loss at 23 after a "freak accident" when a ceiling fan fell on her head. Unable to read, write, or even tie her shoes, Su Meck spent the next years acquiring basic skills together with her young kids, learning "reading, spelling, counting, addition, subtraction and handwriting" along with them. Later she learned to mimic folks around her and acquired the aerobic skills to become an instructor at health clubs. She shared her remarkable story in a *NYTimes Magazine Lives*.⁵ Su Meck's book "I Forgot to Remember: A Memoir of Amnesia" was published in 2014.

References

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