

Starting a Reminiscence and Reflection Group

What is the aim of such a group?

To reminisce and reflect... call it something else if you don't like this title!

To engage elderly people who may be isolated and vulnerable in reminiscing and reflecting not just on their lives but life in general with others of a similar generation. The net effect of successful groups will be to combat loneliness, stimulate a positive sense of self and to pass time in an enjoyable yet focussed way.

Be brave and start your own group using these guidelines! There are no special qualifications needed just the spirit to start one...

Seven Starting a Group Questions

1. Does it need a facilitator?

I would suggest two facilitators as a balance of characters is appreciated in group dynamics. The main essential qualifications are ; warmth, empathy, genuine interest, compassion and enjoyment of communication. It is desirable that a facilitator is able to lead a discussion and spot where conversation is becoming stuck, repetitive or causing distress to anyone present. Of course such control is not altogether possible but a good facilitator will leave the people present at a group feeling respected, safe and contained. A facilitator who can manage these invisible boundaries is very important to a successful group. Some research or knowledge into the social, political and domestic events in the life time of the group is desirable as an informed facilitator can better guide conversation although it is important not to slip into a teacher role! Like anything the more knowledgeable and personally engaged you become in the reminiscences and reflections of others then the more you will learn and stimulate.

2. Where should a group take place?

A group can take place in a space in the community. This could be a quiet agreed space in a café, church, library or community centre. If the clients are from an old people's home it will ideally be in the nicest part of the home. I would recommend morning as a time when most elderly people are widest awake. Try to ensure the room is warm and comfortable with a low table in the centre for objects to sit and that everyone can see each other. I would recommend a horse shoe shape with one facilitator at the end with control of auditory/visual equipment and the other facilitator seated amongst the participants. If there is a piano and someone can play or be invited in for the music session to play some popular tunes from the 40's or 50's then this would be a bonus!

If the venue is someone's home and the facilitator is not someone in employment running the group then it is important that the person facilitating is not also home owner /renter as some degree of neutrality is important. For some clients a bit like a book club the venue could rotate between people's homes. However you would need to be sure that members were not going to be too confused or disorientated by this. It all depends on your target group. The bonus of a public place is it is likely to be covered by public liability insurance should there be an accident. Think about where to advertise for group members if this is necessary.

Starting Questions

3. Who should be in the group?

It could be elderly people in an area who are accessed via Alzheimers UK. It could be elderly people known to you. It could be elderly people in a residential home. Consideration if travel is involved must be given to transportation and who is not capable of making their way to a venue. Can you access a community transport group that could facilitate this? Is this going to be an open or closed group- new members welcomed anytime on a drop in drop out basis or a set number of people who commit in principle to the duration of the group? You need to decide. I would recommend members being selected in advance otherwise it will not feel safe or as if there is commitment in my opinion.

Do not have people whose dementia is so advanced that they can't listen or converse as this can be distracting and lower spirits. It is important that members look forward to and actively enjoy the group. If you have a very dominant member, allow them to speak but actively swerve the conversation to another member or change the direction of the subject if you feel their voice is becoming oppressive to other's right to self-expression. Some people can sap energy through their volubility. Conversely if there is someone extremely quiet or shy don't feel you have to make them talk but be sure to give them extra attention at the round of introductions. Some groups have members who never speak but who are a benign presence and get much from coming. Keep records of who attends and participation/enjoyment levels. [Link to word document on the site.](#)

Many of those in a reminiscence/reflection group will suffer from ill health or other disabilities. Try to be sensitive to the role these play in the group communication process or in their life overall and mention it if it is relevant and won't be misconstrued. Members may come from different ethnicities and be a minority within the group on a class or cultural basis. Try if possible to make the group as balanced as possible in terms of ethnicity, class and gender. Often in these situations there are more women than men due to longevity and possibly I speculate because women are more comfortable in forging new relationships in group contexts. Try to look at assumptions that might be being made in conversation because of an unconscious bias but don't let this inhibit anyone from expression. Refer to the ground rules rather than personalising any interventions that take place or shaming and naming [see below].

Starting Questions

4. How much is it going to cost to run the group?

The answer is very little if you are running it from an establishment such as a home for the elderly. Do make sure it is in the nicest space possible as a change of venue from their normal sitting area is what will help make it feel different and more stimulating. It may also be very little if you already have a suitable group in your resource whether that is a day centre or drop in centre.

The issue of cost can arise from the need to motivate pre-existing employees/volunteers to have a reward factor from doing it. For some facilitating such a group may be a reward in itself in that it will make their day more interesting and give them a new found skill to put on the CV. Alternatively the home/community centre may be able to access some funding to pay for free lancers to facilitate the group for them. Funding may come from lottery money or charity money reserved in particular for combatting loneliness. There is also a space to consider that the elderly person or a relative might be pleased to contribute to the funding of the group if a cost is incurred and it is in a setting where people might be able to afford it. Make sure both of you manage the money with clear records of income and expenditure and petty cash.

5. Do I need any equipment?

The main bit of equipment is two enthusiastic facilitators as described above. After this you can steadily gather your own equipment. The equipment ingredients are all still out there in people's homes and second hand and charity shops. Do see **the equipment list below** that goes with each session but if you want to try something already prepared use these links to **free** materials. The one below gives some food and sweet associated memorabilia e.g photos of factory girls, posters for food and health, sweet and tin wrappers from the 40's and 50's and it is free!

<https://www.nestle.co.uk/aboutus/history/reminiscence-pack>

A series of reminiscence activities and guide to the dementia process for groups where people participate have dementia is provided through this site. There are some free resources and cheap and thorough reminiscence packs for reasonable prices aimed particularly at those doing groups in homes for the elderly.

<http://www.activityresources.co.uk/home/>

Starting questions

6. How many sessions should a group run for and how long should the sessions be?

I recommend running groups in blocks of six with a different subject to be covered in each block. My recommendation is that they are held weekly as this gives a sense of flow and commitment but if this is not practical then two weekly or monthly can also work. It is hoped that the group will be something people look forward to and even prepare for as illustrated below. Given people's natural attention span is not much longer than 40 minutes without a break I would suggest approximately 60 minute sessions with a ten minute break in the middle for informal connections to be made and beverages partaken of. They will be enjoyed more if something of the group has been digested before them!

7.What could be the structure of the sessions?

First of all decide upon what topics you hope to cover in 6 weeks. It may be that 8 weeks feels better for you. You need to gather your materials according to the topic covered each week so a little preparation for the first course you run needs to be made and having a reliable laptop or overhead projector as the internet can be enormously helpful for bringing ideas alive. The group may take on a life of it's own and with a gap you may want to run another one. The same topics might be covered differently on the next occasion. Subjects for the group are suggested below. Be mindful that it is likely that all those in the group [as we all are throughout life] affected by the death and loss of important people to them and for some preoccupations with their own or someone close to them's passing. Do not be frightened or avoidant of this subject and be alert to other therapeutic resources you might help to refer people on to.

A time structure

Here is a suggestion for how 60 minutes could be passed: Session 1

Kick off at 11am....allow up to ten minutes for people to arrive and settle down. You could have objects and literature on display in a central coffee table with chairs all around it in a circle. Do not be rigid with the time but make sure a session never lasts over 90 minutes because too long may be off putting for some. It is better to leave them wanting more!

10 minutes:

A typical session could start off with introductions. It is helpful because of the fallibility of memory to start by asking everyone to say something about themselves and introduce themselves again at the start of each session. Preface this by saying you will be giving about two minutes per person as a way of allowing you to refer to time if someone is going vastly over time. Be mindful in the first session to allow as much user participation as possible as this is the first phase of any group. The adage 'forming, storming, norming and performing' is a helpful one as groups have their own rhythm and need to establish themselves.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuckman%27s_stages_of_group_development

For the very first session if people do not know each other, you could ask them to say what their name is and how they feel about their name and if they know why they were given this name. You could go on to ask them about how their day has gone so far if you feel that more ice needs to be broken.

For the first session depending on how informal or formal you want to be you can create some ground rules. Be clear that you will stick to the allocated time and what it is and when there will be a serving of refreshments. This will make people feel contained and keep them in their comfort zone. Secondly you may talk about the need to respect people's right to hold opinions different to their own. This will be a useful one to fall back on should there be any overt disrespect or character clash which is unusual but possible and the reminder to dispute the opinion rather than attack the person giving it. Acknowledge permission that anyone can leave the room at any point they want to and finally check they all know where the fire exit, toilet and reception is! Mention that anything personal that gets shared should stay in the group.

In future sessions the facilitators may want to remind clients each time of the basic ground rules of the group if this seems helpful because of fading memories rather than any other reason.

As long as 20 minutes could pass with the first being devoted to introductions and a recap of how their week has gone. Informal conversation can help prepare the way for more focussed conversation as people relax and therefore focus better.

Timing

30 minutes

Discuss topic in hand- decide how many areas within the topic that you want to cover before the break eg three sub topics. Don't be frightened of the participants feelings of loss or touching on the subject of death as this will be very much part of people's experiences and a safe space to talk is as much a function of the group as the subject on the agenda. Reaching out to people as described in [\[link to PDF of images for creating conversations\]](#) is so important to creating the right trusting and respectful atmosphere for more interactions containing shared reflections and experiences.

10 minutes

Coffee, tea and don't forget the biscuits or possibly bakery treats if you can afford this! My advice is not to depend on an outsider bring in the coffee/tea/refreshments as it can stop the flow/momentum/atmosphere created. Better that you have a flask of heated water in the room with provisions and bakery treats in the background [!] as then the facilitators can serve and choose the right moment to break.

10 minutes

For the remaining topics within the session you hoped to cover. Make sure that in both sides of the session there is something tangible or sensory that you can share. For example if you are doing music then perhaps you could end with a good tune that all are happy to hear or maybe members of the group will be prepared to sing a little song together or have a solo! You will need to be creative here and balance the timing with sensitivity to the group's needs to explore topics that might be not quite how you anticipated.

Some Topics to choose from...

My house...

What did you do to have fun as a child? Were you allowed to explore and roam freely? What did children wear- have there been changes? Can you remember first seeing or getting a TV? What did you watch?

Tell us about what arrangements were made for household tasks. How did washing up work? Washing clothes? Cleaning? Shoe Polishing? Did clothes get bought or made? Where did you shop? When did you get control of money and how did you spend it?

Talk about the different smells in the home and the street because of changes in technology and society eg the delivery of coal, milk and provisions to houses in some areas.

Shops and the role of the shopkeeper in the high street- The erosion of haberdashers, tailors, bakers, grocers, butchers, fishmongers, music halls, cinemas, pubs- advent of shopping centres and supermarkets. Did they actively notice any of these changes?

Did they have central heating in their home? Food fashions- the muffin man, sally buns, Eccles cakes, potato farleys, soda bread. What might a typical breakfast/lunch/tea or dinner include? Did they talk about snacks/suppers or dinners? Were people thinner and smaller when they were young? Generate discussion on the importance of diet and lifestyle.

Your clients might even have small objects from their childhood they would be happy to bring in or photos of their own lives around relevant topics or objects which could be handed round at the start of the following week's session.

Equipment for My House Session

- ❖ Show people imagery of typical household objects in the 40's and 50's [which would make your client group in their 70's and 80's]. Website link to these things
- ❖ You could create a collection over time of small portable objects that could be on a table in the centre of the room eg old fashioned food mixer, hairdryer, sherry decanter, children's toy, a game of jacks, buttons, fur muffs, a teapot, a Dorothy bag, a shaving mug and shaving brush, a table cloth, a teapot
- ❖ Fashion: some hats that men and women would have worn. Discuss which occasions called for what apparel. A christening robe, a modern baby grow to compare baby and child fashions, candle holders
- ❖ Hand round some traditional sweets/scones/cake to kick the session off

Education and Employment

Education

How long was the school day? What were your subjects? Were the classrooms noisy or quiet? Did you enjoy school? What were the main ways that it equipped you for life? Did you feel school prepared you for the society you lived in? Have you kept friendships from your school days? The school leaving age. Discipline

Equipment:

- ❖ A cane, Blackboard rubber, ink pen, ink stand, ink
- ❖ Photos on I pad/screen of classrooms from the 40's and 50's

Employment

Availability of employment when they were first looking for it. Was it dictated by the area you lived in? Was employment hard to find? What did an interview involve in those days? Now there is legislation to control questions about your marital status or cultural practices or a disability but this was not the case when the elderly were young. First salary- do you remember?

What was expected of you by society, by yourself ,by your family?

Did you feel a strong sense of vocation or was it about earning money to live to do what you did enjoy? What was on offer in your area? Were there blocks because of your sex/race or background? How did you enjoy your first job? Tell us more about what dominated those first jobs.

Equipment:

- ❖ Photos of industrial workers, office workers and office equipment [typewriters, old phones]
- ❖ Objects such as phone, typewriter, a telegram

Holidays and childrearing

Holidays

Was going on holiday something people did when you were a child? What did holidays consist of in your family? Can you remember special times and places?

How did people usually travel? Did you enjoy the travelling process as a child? Did you go abroad? What was a typical holiday in the UK.

What sort of role has travel and holidaying played in your life? Discussion around trains, cars, planes and coach/bus travel.

Equipment:

- ❖ **Obtain photos and pictures of holiday advert posters, suitcases from the 40's/50's**
- ❖ **Discuss what one travelled with from earlier days and show on screen or hand around in person**
- ❖ **Bring some material the following session from Butlins, Pontins holiday camps if the group are interested**

Childrearing

What were the beliefs about children and how they should be treated in society when you were being brought up? How did it differ around the group? Do you look back at possibly corporal punishment and think it was the right way to treat children?

What kept you following the rules? What were the rules of conduct? Was swearing something that was acceptable? Did you get pocket money? What sort of thing in your childhood would have been desirable to spend money on?

What were the games and adventures that children were able to engage in when you were young?

Equipment

- ❖ **Old fashioned board games**
- ❖ **Old photos of children if possible doing things**

Health [physical and emotional]

Was health something that was talked about in magazines and newspapers?

Was there talk of self development and healthy living as you became an adult and became aware of such things? Do you remember what illness was common in your youth eg Ricketts, Polio, TB. Were you vaccinated and do you recall being given antibiotics?

What were beliefs about diet/smoking/fresh air/ exercise/alcohol ? Was any sort of legal drug use acceptable?

Do you remember how you were treated at home or at school if you were unwell?

What was a visit from or to the GP/hospital /dentist like? How did pain get numbed for dental work? Old fashioned remedies for dental pain eg cloves This may lead on to talk about superstitions in health and other areas.

Was there any experimentation with alternative forms of health in your life? This could include massage, acupuncture, meditation,

Equipment:

- ❖ **Advert talking about the benefits of smoking leading to reflect on how advice changes**
- ❖ **An old fashioned thermometer ,medicine container or health notice**
- ❖ **Old fashioned remedies such as a ring of gold [to rub on a sty] , old wives tales about how to get rid of warts for example spitting on them first thing in the morning, cloves for tooth ache- research some more!**
- ❖ **An old fashioned umbrella – link to superstition and changing appearance of these through time**

Music and Entertainment

Music and Entertainment----you could do this over two sessions

Was there music in your house in any of the homes you have lived in? If not did other people's houses have radio/gramophones/pianos or other instruments?

Did you play an instrument? How did you find this?

Did you go to dances when you were young? How old were you at your first concert /band or dance? **Did you have to be asked or ask to dance or was it ok to dance alone?**

Can you remember your first concert? You could discuss impact of music from America, classical music, jazz, folk and hymns in church. Did they have to sing them at school? Do they remember the words? Have the words ready as any search on google will immediately bring them up just from the first line.

Equipment:

- ❖ Sheet music for piano or singalong folk songs they might have been bought up with. See list of favourites and do research if none of these fit the ethnicity or taste of your group.
- ❖ A record sleeve
- ❖ Lap top to access music directly or lyrics
- ❖ An instrument- banjo, accordion,guitar. Music to play during session to all listen to and then talk about associations with it
- ❖ Opera glasses [often used for Music Hall entertainment as well as Opera, Ballet and Theatre

Cinema

What did going to the cinema involve for an evening in your youth? Did they have a pianist at the front of the cinema? Did you ever see silent movies? Was it ok to eat or drink during a film?

Did your parents take you or was this something you did with friends or boyfriends? **I wonder what the term for having a romantic /physical relationship with someone was? Courting? Sweet heart? Walking out?**

Did you have a hero/heroine of the screen? Was there a character in a film that you wished you were or that you admired hugely?

Equipment:

- ❖ an I pad to play selected movie themes
- ❖ a poster of a famous film eg Gone with the Wind, The sound of Music, The Wizard of Oz, any Hitchcock film

Theatre-performance/plays/pantos and comics

Did you study any playwrights at school? Did you have to do Shakespeare? How did you find this? Famous comedians of the 40's onwards

Has anyone seen a Shakespeare play at the theatre? How did you find going to a live show compared to watching something on the screen?

Did anyone act in their earlier life? How did you find the experience/profession?

Equipment:

- ❖ Opera glasses
- ❖ Old programmes
- ❖ Gloves for theatre for a woman
- ❖ Top Hat

Art and Poetry

Did anyone paint in earlier life or enjoy visiting art exhibitions? Could there be an offshoot painting or sketching group from the reminiscence group? Ask if anyone would like to bring in a picture/sculpture/ornament to the group to look at and talk about what memories or feelings it evokes.

Is there a poem that anyone has as a favourite that they can recite from memory or would like to bring in and read aloud? A facilitator could also choose one. This could lead to discussion on the nature of the poem and what it might be communicating. A poem that reflected life in their youth might be good but also any number that they might have come across about life, aging, love and beauty could provide positive food for thought.

Equipment:

- ❖ **Poetry from the internet or poetry books. The choice of poetry is overwhelming but this is a link to a good anthology:**
<https://www.amazon.com/Seven-Ages-Anthology-Poetry-Music/dp/9626341890>
- ❖ **This is a good site for hunting out poems according to author, taste or subject and find out the top 100 poems of all time :**
www.poemhunter.com/
- ❖ **Pad and pens in case every one wants to write a line of a poem about the group, their feelings for the day. Be playful if the group is up for it!**
- ❖ **Laptop/I pad to access words if a memory fades. Enter the first line and the rest will come up.**

Society, Politics, Culture and World War 11

What was life like outside the home? Did money as it does now dictate your life style? What were the fashions like in the streets in your childhood?

Did different cultures and classes mix anymore than they do now? Were there invisible barriers in order to advance? Would it have been fine with your family if you dated/courted with someone of a different background? Were you more or less aware of poverty around you then or now? Do you remember the advent of the welfare state or the NHS?

Crime- what sort of crime or criminals do you remember reading about or witnessing? Notorious criminals of their youth if in the UK would have been the Kray twins, John Christie, Peter Rachman

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_British_gangsters//

https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Famous_British_Murder_Cases

Royalty- Memories of royal events. Are you a republican or a royalist?

What machinery were you aware of in everyday life? Do you think each new advance has affected the way we think and behave? When you look at your children or grandchildren what changes do you see in the way that children are regarded and what interests children?

They will have been children in the war so discuss the impact of war on their lives. Do they remember rations and ration books/ making do with mending, darning and knitting?

What was London like in the war time? What was the country like in the war time? Do you remember using the Anderson shelters at school or at home? Were you scared as a child by the war? Do you remember VE day? War being declared?

Acknowledge everyone has had very different backgrounds [this is likely to be the case] and this may well generate discussions on inequality and political principles. It is probably best to steer this session

Equipment :

- ❖ **A local newspaper from when they were young adults- 1940's and 1950's**
- ❖ **Check out a speech from Winston Churchill, Clement Atlee or any other famous politician from their youth and read out a bit. See what this brings up**

Evaluation

At the last group it can be helpful to have an evaluative section of time where people voice how they have found the sessions. If possible get some individual feedback to cover what people might not say aloud in front of other group attenders or you could do an anonymous survey if this does not feel cumbersome. Feedback is good for raising funds and thinking about when to run another one. Leave 15 minutes at the end for reflections on the group and finish with some music from people's earlier life and a sing song if wanted. Perhaps the group could vote on which tune they want to end with at the start of the group. Perhaps you can ask a visiting pianist again for the final group!

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Popular Folk Songs

English

- My Bonnie is Over the Ocean
- What shall we do with the drunken sailor?
- Early One Morning
- Blow, Blow thou Winter Wind
- Drink to me only with Thine Eyes
- Greensleeves
- Scarborough Fair
- Blaydon Races

Irish

- Cockles and Mussels
- Come Back to Erin
- I'll take you Home Again, Kathleen
- Kathleen Mavourneen
- The Last Rose of Summer
- The Rose of Tralee
- The Spinning Wheel

Folk Songs

Scottish

- The Banks of Allan Water
 - Charlie is my Darling
 - Loch Lomond
 - Skye Boat Song
 - Wi' a Hundred Pipers
 - Ye Banks and Braes
 - The Blue Bell of Scotland
 - Auld Lang Syne
 - I Loved a Lass
- Please research into music from any other culture or background that is relevant to the people in the group!
 - See website for a list of classics which has a range of classical 'hits' as well as pop/folk/traditional et al.
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