

Reminiscing



*Children at Glendaruel school listening to a gramophone. 1912.
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Reminiscing is something we do when stimulated by familiar things: objects, smells, sights and sounds. Music is a powerful facilitator for triggering the specific long-term memory referred to as reminiscence.

There are three main types of memory: sensory, short-term and long-term. These memory types are not stored in a single location in the brain. Sensory memory occurs in the prefrontal cortex. The hippocampus is responsible for taking some short term memory from the cortex at the front of the brain and converting it to long term memory. Both long-term memory and the emotion area of the brain are located at the back of the brain near the central nervous system. This area is also where all of the senses—except smell—are processed. Hence, we cannot have a response to an experience without it being emotional. That is why people who have difficulties remembering the past find a sensory approach to reminiscing better than a verbal approach. Nonetheless, no matter what triggers a person's response—be it music, an object, a sensation, or whatever—they respond to the trigger with words.

Music is used as an important trigger for those who suffer from severe neurological deterioration such as Alzheimer's Disease. Due to this deterioration, recalling events is not possible. Fortunately, even with severe deterioration, the emotional centre of the brain is maintained. This means that the distant past is evoked by

providing the participant with stimuli that triggers an emotional response that the patient can then express in words and song.

The Outreach Program at Museum Victoria delivers a range of programs out into the community in various formats. The Outreach Kits are one such program. The Kits are specifically designed to provide carers of the aged with a tool to facilitate Reminiscence sessions. An audio stimulant is an important element included in the Outreach Kits. It takes the form of audio tapes with jingles from era's past. The kits also contain a range of objects and photographs that can be touched and explored for their shape, texture, colour, smell and sound. They have all been selected for their sensory appeal. The contents of the kits are emotionally powerful—they evoke memory, promote verbal expression and facilitate discussion. In neurological terms, the kit contents are referred to as 'triggers'.

Childhood Games and Pastimes, one of the kits topics, explores a range of activities that were played by children growing up during the 1920s to 1940s. These games may have been played in the school yard or at home with friends and include a range of songs. These tunes would have been chanted or sung to accompany some of the games. The words are included in the kit and are used to prompt discussion. For example, you may remember singing, "A sailor went to sea, sea, sea..." as part of a clapping game where two girls would stand opposite

each other and clap their hands against the other's in a rehearsed style. Members in the group are encouraged to play the games and sing the rhymes. Carers report that individuals who may have been withdrawn and not spoken for a long time will start reminiscing when listening to the audio tape playing a jingle that is familiar to them from their youth. For example, in the Recipes For Remembering kit, a participant will suddenly liven up and start singing along: "I like Aeroplane Jelly, Aeroplane Jelly for me...". Although the patient usually won't recall that they just sang along to a tune, their general demeanour is brighter and more positive.

The Outreach Kits are usually used in a group situation rather than one-on-one because one person's reminiscence can trigger another person's memory and in turn generate group discussion. In addition, group work is more effective because a younger carer might not know what it is an aged participant is trying to remember whereas the participant's contemporaries might. The Outreach Kits provide the stimulus for each participant to share their memories and bring the objects to life!

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