

Remembering together

Making a life history book

What is a life history book?

A life history book is a homemade book compiled to capture memories and stories about a person's life. It can be referred to over and over again by the person and their family and friends. It might be used as a valuable resource by future carers and ultimately it can become a cherished heirloom enjoyed by future generations.

Making a life history book can be an enjoyable and empowering activity for a person with dementia. Many people will claim they haven't done 'anything special', however all memories and stories should be cherished and the book is a way to celebrate the person and their life.

How can a life history book be important to a person living with dementia?

While remembering very recent things (short-term memory) can be difficult, many people with dementia find they can clearly recall things they have done years ago (long-term memory). Making a life history book draws upon this long-term memory, emphasising what people can remember rather than what they can't. Reminiscing in this way can raise a person's self-esteem and improve their well-being.

A life history book may be something that visiting children or grandchildren can look through with the person or it can be referred to by professional carers to learn more about the person, or even be used as part of a care management plan.

The level of a person's involvement should not be underestimated; when prompted by the right things people can display surprising levels of recognition. Finding time to work together to make a life history book can provide them with a meaningful and stimulating activity.

Some people living with dementia may question why the book is being made. Offer an explanation that is relevant to them such as sharing an enjoyable activity together, a chance to revisit old photographs or a way of finding out more about them as a person. They may be further motivated by the book being a gift for children or grandchildren to help families find out more about their heritage.

What should a life story book look like?

There is no one standard format for a life history book, however, it should be visual and attractive, inviting people to look inside, to remember, to share and to engage with others. People with dementia can bring their own individuality or creative interpretation to the process; some people may recall long stories, others may remember just a few words or a sentence. Try and use their words and ideas. They may also like to choose pictures or photographs to include in the book.

Photographs and documents

Stories can be illustrated with copies of photographs and documents like school certificates, old postcards and pictures of significant things which relate to key moments in a person's life. Personal mementoes, such as a watch that belonged to a parent and has many associated memories, could be photographed, attached to a colourful border and then placed in the book. Print photographs from the computer or make colour photocopies and keep original photographs and documents safe for future family use.

If you don't have photographs and documents

Photographs and documents may have been lost over time. It is therefore important to think creatively about finding things to use, such as a recent map showing a place of birth or a modern photograph of a school attended. It may be possible to find old photographs and postcards at antique fairs, secondhand book or charity shops or online.

Finding a suitable book

There are many books available including template life history books which can be filled in with details. Alternatively, you could use a scrapbook or album with plastic pockets which can be filled with loose pages and small mementoes. Choosing a book together during a day out can add to what should be a pleasurable process.

How to make the book

Making a life history book is about sharing memories and working together. This can be a time-consuming process; it can take some people longer to recall things and it is important that they do not feel rushed. People can gain much pleasure and satisfaction from telling their story and playing an active role in the creation of their book.

Some people may want to write their own memories themselves and reading a person's words in their handwriting can add a richness to the book. Other people may prefer to write their story using a computer. Written text should be produced in a clear font in at least size 12.

When writing is difficult for the person telling their story, try to write down their words as they speak. This gives you the story from their experience which will be more accurate than you writing it up later. Listening to a person's life story can also help you to discover more about them. If the person finds it difficult to remember recent events, focus on memories from longer ago such as those from school or early adulthood.

Wherever possible, personalise the book you are making. You could use the person's favourite colour for borders or write out the words of songs or poems that are special to them. Select a photograph of them for the cover of the book or ask them to include a photograph or picture of their choice.

A different way of compiling the book is to include details and stories based on what you know about the person and have been told over the years. While this type of book can be useful when engaging with the person and encouraging them to talk, a life history book made with the person can have more meaning and value for everyone involved in terms of the process and the end product.

Although often a life history book will be arranged chronologically, the recall process may not work that way! An early story may lead to a separate memory or something might be recalled at a later date. Make notes at the time so that you can arrange the information in order when you put the book together. It's a good idea to think about the presentation of the book before you start but be flexible.



Getting started

The following ideas may help you. You will need paper, a pen, glue stick, copies of old photographs, personal mementoes, a camera (if you want to include new photographs of people, places or items) and some maps.

- **Starting with a timeline:** Draw a vertical line in the middle of a piece of paper. On one side write time periods or subjects: childhood, young adulthood, work, hobbies. On the other write key events and memories, such as: place of birth, first school, second school, birth of brothers and sisters, getting a job and getting married.

Try to produce a general picture of important life events rather than concentrating on dates which may be harder to remember. Are there any photographs or documents to illustrate these life events? Making a timeline can make it easier to piece together memories in a chronological way and get the book in order.

- **Starting with a photograph:** Looking at old photographs together can be a good way to find out more about life events. Someone with dementia may recognise older photographs more easily than recent photographs which they may find confusing. More recent family members may not be recognised, whereas photographs of siblings may be greeted with an immediate response.

Choose all photographs carefully. When you are trying to find out more about the pictures use open questions (who, why, where, how?) to piece together the particular event or memory. Alternatively you can try using a statement such as: 'Everyone looks very smart/happy in this photograph...' to see whether further details are recalled but be patient – this may take some time. Copies of photographs and their associated memories can then be placed in the book.

- **Starting with a personal memento:** Memories can be attached to just about everything including mementoes displayed at home. The story attached to the memento and a photograph could be included in the book.
- **Starting with a map:** Maps can be used to show a person's life journey from where they were born, to the places they have lived in, to where they live now. Some people may have lived in several areas of the world. This journey could be plotted on maps and copies placed in the life history book.

Be sensitive

It is important to work sensitively; there may be things that a person does not want to talk about. Concentrate on memories which people enjoy recalling and avoid or work around those which may prove to be upsetting. It may be more appropriate to produce a book about parts of someone's life rather than the whole of their life.

Some stories and memories might feature people who are no longer alive. If a person gets upset, rather than changing the subject, their feelings should be acknowledged. Sharing an unhappy episode can be helpful and a person may want to talk about something which troubles them. Ensure that you finish in a positive way with a happier story or memory.



Themes for a life history book

Personal details: place of birth, siblings, family memories, childhood memories, first job, other employment, getting married, children, significant family events.

Other general themes: places lived in and visited, clothing and hairstyles, leisure time, hobbies, cars owned, holidays, favourite food and drink, favourite books or films.

Key points

Do

- think creatively about prompting memories and their presentation
- work at a pace everyone is happy with
- ensure the person wants to make the book; if you are not a family member, make sure the family is informed
- be a good listener; support and reassure the person and always respect their wishes.
- ensure the book is the property of the person it is about.

Don't

- use a life history book in a testing way: it should be a pleasurable, sharing and empowering process, not a stressful one
- ask too many questions
- rush – this can be a much longer process than anticipated.

Have fun!

Making a life history book should be engaging and fun for everyone involved. You may learn things that you had not known about the person with dementia, and it may open up communication by encouraging them to talk about aspects of their life. We hope that you find the whole process very enjoyable and rewarding as you put together a valuable resource which will help you to interact with the person with dementia as well as remembering what makes them unique.

[alzheimers.org.uk](https://www.alzheimers.org.uk)

Alzheimer's Society is the leading support and research charity for people with dementia, their families and carers.

Registered charity no. 296645. Alzheimer's Society operates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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