

# Life story workshops in care homes: six ready-to-use session plans

Six life story workshop plans for care homes: 45 minutes, 6 to 8 residents. Format, ground rules, standard outline, themed plans and evaluation grid.

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## The format

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| Length       | 45 minutes, no more: attention and tiredness decide.                                                             |
| Group        | 6 to 8 residents. More, and each person speaks too little; fewer, and the conversation runs dry.                 |
| Facilitation | One activity coordinator, ideally with a second staff member or volunteer who takes notes and helps people move. |
| Place        | A quiet room away from through traffic, chairs in a circle or around a table.                                    |
| Rhythm       | One session a week, same day, same time: regularity is a landmark in itself.                                     |

## Workshop ground rules

- Taking part is voluntary: people can come, listen and say nothing.
- Memories are never corrected. A wrong date, or a story that changes from week to week, is not a mistake to point out.
- Painful subjects are never forced: if a resident closes up, thank them and move on.
- What is said in the workshop stays there. Before a memory is used elsewhere (the home's newsletter, a display, the family), ask for the consent of the person or their representative.
- With cognitive impairment, prefer closed questions, things to touch, smell or hear, and short sentences.
- Observations that matter for care (unusual sadness, anxiety, worrying remarks) are passed on to the care team.

## The standard outline

The same skeleton for every plan. The timings are guidelines: better to shorten a round of conversation than to rush the close.

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|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 0 – 5 min   | Welcome. Settle everyone in, greet each resident by name, announce to-day's theme and recall the ground rules in one sentence.                                 |
| 5 – 10 min  | Opener. Introduce the prompt (an object, a photo, music, a smell), pass it around and let the first reactions come.                                            |
| 10 – 35 min | Conversation. Ask the open questions from the plan, follow up, pass the conversation between residents. The second facilitator notes key words, names, places. |
| 35 – 40 min | Record. Read back what was noted. Each person says what they agree to keep, and in what form.                                                                  |
| 40 – 45 min | Close. Thank everyone, announce next session's theme, end on a calm moment (a tune, a photo).                                                                  |

## Schooldays

**Aim** Bring back childhood memories through school, an experience almost everyone shares.

**Opener** Pass the pen and the slate around: "Who learnt to write with one of these?"

### MATERIALS

- A dip pen, an inkwell, a slate or an old exercise book, ideally to hold
- Old class photos or pictures of classrooms
- A wall map or a reproduction of one

### PROMPT QUESTIONS

- ☐ How did you get to school, and who with?
- ☐ Do you remember your teacher's name?
- ☐ What got you punished, and what got you praised?
- ☐ What did you eat at lunchtime? What did you do at playtime?
- ☐ Until what age did you go to school?

**What to keep** One sentence per resident about their school (the village, the teacher, a playground game), read back and approved at the end.

**Adapting** Closed questions ("Did you wear a uniform?"), objects to handle, a song learnt at school as the opener.

## PLAN 2

# A working life

**Aim** Value each person's skills and their place in the world of work.

**Opener** Put a tool in the middle: "What is it for? Who has used one?"

## MATERIALS

- A few old tools or photos of tools (farming, sewing, workshop, office, shop)
- Pictures of trades from the past

## PROMPT QUESTIONS

- ☐ What was your first job? How old were you?
- ☐ Tell us about a working day, from morning to evening.
- ☐ Which gesture from your work could you still do with your eyes closed?
- ☐ Who taught you the job?
- ☐ What were you proudest of in your work?

**What to keep** A list of the group's jobs, each with a gesture or a word from the trade.

**Adapting** Mime a gesture rather than describe it; start from the hands ("Have your hands done a lot of work?").

## Celebrations and seasons

**Aim** Rediscover the landmarks of the calendar and shared moments of celebration.

**Opener** Play a dance tune, then ask: "Where did people go dancing where you lived?"

### MATERIALS

- A calendar or pictures of the seasons
- Photos of celebrations (Christmas, dances, weddings, village fairs, national holidays)
- A dance tune or a popular song

### PROMPT QUESTIONS

- ☐ Which celebration did you look forward to most as a child?
- ☐ What was Christmas like in your family?
- ☐ Was there a village fair? What happened there?
- ☐ Where did you go dancing, and who with?
- ☐ Which season did you like best, and why?

**What to keep** A group calendar: one celebration or memory per month, with the name of the person who told it.

**Adapting** Start from the current season and what can be seen through the window; sing together rather than ask questions.

## Cooking and recipes

**Aim** Awaken memory through the senses, and collect family recipes.

**Opener** Pass the smell boxes around one by one, without a word, and gather what they bring to mind.

### MATERIALS

- Smell boxes (cinnamon, thyme, coffee, vanilla, lavender)
- A few old kitchen utensils (coffee grinder, whisk, cake tin)
- A sheet per resident to write down "their" recipe

### PROMPT QUESTIONS

- ☐ Which dish from your childhood would you like to eat one more time?
- ☐ Who did the cooking at home? Who taught you?
- ☐ What did people eat on special days?
- ☐ Did you have a garden, chickens, home-made preserves?
- ☐ What is your recipe, with your own little trick?

**What to keep** A small booklet of the group's recipes, each signed with its author's first name.

**Adapting** Stick to smells and objects. Any tasting is decided with the care team (allergies, diets, swallowing difficulties).

## Childhood home and homeland

**Aim** Place each person in the places they have lived, and get people from different backgrounds talking.

**Opener** With each person, mark on the map the place where they were born.

### MATERIALS

- A large map of the country (and of the world if residents come from elsewhere)
- Old postcards of villages, towns and landscapes
- Stickers or pins

### PROMPT QUESTIONS

- ☐ Describe the house you grew up in: the rooms, the garden, the view.
- ☐ Who lived there with you?
- ☐ What was your street, village or neighbourhood like?
- ☐ When did you leave that house, and where did you go?
- ☐ Have you been back since?

**What to keep** The group's map, with everyone's birthplaces and the places they have lived.

**Adapting** One postcard at a time; questions about what can be seen ("Was there a church like this one?").

## Objects that tell stories

|        |                                                                                                        |
|--------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aim    | Start from a personal object to draw out a story, with help from families.                             |
| Opener | Each object is placed in the middle; the group guesses who it belongs to before its owner presents it. |

### MATERIALS

- An object or a photo brought by each resident, prepared with their family the week before
- A table in the middle to put them on

### PROMPT QUESTIONS

- ☐ Where does this object come from? Who gave it to you?
- ☐ Why have you kept it all these years?
- ☐ What memory comes back when you hold it?
- ☐ Who would you like to pass it on to?

|              |                                                                                                          |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What to keep | A photo of each object with a sentence from its owner — to share with the family if the resident agrees. |
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| Adapting | A family photo works as well as an object; leave time to touch it before talking. |
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# The evaluation grid

To fill in after each session, for each resident, in two minutes. It is for adjusting the workshop and reporting on it (care home project, funders), not for grading people.

Resident:

Session date and theme:

| Observation                                         | No | A little | Yes |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----|----------|-----|
| Came and stayed until the end                       |    |          |     |
| Spoke without being asked                           |    |          |     |
| Responded to prompts                                |    |          |     |
| Talked with another participant                     |    |          |     |
| Recalled a precise memory (a name, a place, a date) |    |          |     |
| Showed enjoyment during or after the session        |    |          |     |
| Showed discomfort (to pass on to the team)          |    |          |     |

## Session review

What worked well

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What to change next time

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Memories collected (with the people's consent)

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