

Agnieszka Sikora-Balicka<sup>1</sup>

ORCID 0000-0003-4589-8849

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## The Therapeutic Values of the Programme “Remembering Yesterday, Caring for Today” in Dementia Care

### Terapeutyczne wartości programu „Pamiętaj o Wczoraj, Troszcząc się o Dzisiaj” w opiece nad osobą żyjącą z otępieniem

“A very good friend of mine is afraid to come and see me. I have contacted him, but he hasn’t got back to me. A couple of people are a bit wary of me, because I’ve got Alzheimer’s and they are afraid of what it might be – Person living with dementia” (Alzheimer’s Society, 2018).

### Introduction

As average human life expectancy increases, so does the risk of certain forms of brain pathology, which slowly but surely lead to dementia (WHO, 2017). “Dementia is not a specific disease but is rather a general term for the impaired ability to remember, think, or make decisions that interferes with

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<sup>1</sup> Agnieszka Sikora-Balicka, MA, University of Lower Silesia, Poland,  
e-mail: asikorabalicka@gmail.com

doing everyday activities” (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2019). There are many different causes of dementia and many different types. Alzheimer’s disease is considered to be the most common cause of dementia. Other main forms include vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies, a group of diseases that contribute to frontotemporal dementia (frontal lobe degeneration). The boundaries between different forms of dementia are blurred and mixed forms often coexist (University College London via FutureLearn, 2019). Although dementia is not a normal part of the ageing process, its frequency increases dramatically with age (3% of people in the 65-74 age group, 17% of people in the 75-84 age group, 32% of people in the 85-plus age group) (Alzheimer’s and Dementia, 2020). It should be noted that people over 55 years of age are more concerned about the diagnosis of dementia than about any other disease (International Longevity Centre UK, 2014). For many people, the diagnosis has a significant impact on social relationships as they “[...] make their own behaviour dependent, consciously or unconsciously, on the current or expected behaviour of other participants in the interaction” (Encyklopedia PWN, 2020). Many people affected by dementia (42%) experience, due to diagnosis, personal discrimination and social isolation (Alzheimer’s Australia, 2014, p. 6), which “manifests itself in [...] a lack of physical and social contact with others, creating social barriers or psychological mechanisms” (Jacon, 2019). Ultimately, exposure to social isolation and loneliness increases the risk of death by 29 per cent (Alzheimer’s Society, 2018). The participants in a study conducted by the University of Wollongong, Centre for Health Initiatives in Australia, presented a description of the experience of this social isolation:

“No one wants to spend time with me now that I have a diagnosis. It is like they think I no longer count and I am not a person anymore. It makes me so sad and I end up sitting at home wishing life was different.”

“Sometimes my social death makes me more sad than the changes to my brain and the loss of my memories. It makes me so angry. I just want to be counted as a person again.”

“I have lost almost all of my friends and the few I have I see once a year or even once every 2 years. I have one friend who I see about every 4 months.”

“I’ve lost all my friends and I’d love to meet more people my age” (Alzheimer’s Australia, 2014, s. 6).

“The life of a person living with dementia is not defined by the disease, but the main concern is the importance of [...]” (Alzheimer’s Society, 2010a) positive relationships and friendly social groups “[...] in helping them to maintain their well-being and independence” (Alzheimer’s Society, 2010a). There are an increasing number of services and support methods that can help people to live well with dementia. One such method is the scientifically tested and developed programme Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today, which can help a demented person to cope with the problems of loneliness as well as to preserve the memory, confidence and independence for as long as possible among people, “[...] who have and value a common tradition, values and symbols, [...] conscious of their unity, individuality, and readiness to act together, living in a sense of belonging and inner security” (Pilch, 1995, p. 157). Additionally, this innovative method can open the door to the world of a person living with dementia. It supports the process of non-verbal and verbal communication between people. Importantly, it allows the family and/or caregivers to witness their loved one’s spontaneous memory flashes and real-time responses. Life history is important for therapy, care, treatment, and counselling practice.

### **The background of the programme “Remembering Yesterday, Caring for Today” for people living with dementia**

Pam Schweitzer is the originator of the idea for the project Remembering Yesterday, Caring for Today (RYCT). She started her journey as a teacher and an author (1970) writing about the theatre in education and educational drama. Fascinated by reminiscence and oral history, she founded the first professional theatre company, Age Exchange Theatre Trust, in 1983, specialising in reminiscence theatre tours in the UK and Europe (Confer, 2019). In the eighties and nineties of the 20th century, the repertoire of performances was based on the memories of the elderly, produced as part of specially organised reminiscence sessions or oral history programmes (Schweitzer, 2013, p. 84; Schweitzer, 2020). Theatrical performances of seniors from their own memories took place in social spaces, day care centres and long-term care homes (Kosti, 2019). The next stage was the launch in 1987 of the Age Exchange Reminiscence Centre, based in London, as a training centre for those interested in a positive approach to the care of the dementia sufferers.

In 1993, the European Reminiscence Network was established with partners in the European Union, which also operates in the USA, Canada, Latin America, Australia and India. In recognition of the growing understanding of the therapeutic value of creative reminiscence in caring for people living with dementia, an international project for the European Reminiscence Network was launched in 1997, entitled Remembering Yesterday, Caring for Today (RYCT). The project covered people with neurocognitive disorders and their family caregivers, who have found a way to use creative reminiscences to help the loved ones improve their self-esteem and identity. The result of the EU-wide project was the publication (Schweitzer, 2020) of a book entitled Reminiscing with People with Dementia: a handbook for Carers, as well as Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today: reminiscence in dementia care, which promotes best practice in working with creative reminiscence by sharing experiences at home and abroad. The RYCT project was accompanied by the Making Memories Matter project, developed in 2004, involving artists with individual senior citizens to create Life Portraits or Memory Boxes around their life experiences (Pam Schweitzer, 2020). Pam Schweitzer's achievements have been recognised and awarded the National Lifetime Achievement Award of the 5th National Dementia Care Awards) and the title of the Member of the Order of the British Empire for outstanding contributions to Reminiscence.

**“Remembering Yesterday, Caring for Today”  
at the heart of relationships in positive dementia care  
(European Reminiscence Network, 2017)**

The programme Remembering Yesterday, Caring for Today is based on the use of creative reminiscence and interpersonal interaction in reminiscence work to “[...] rediscover and celebrate one’s individuality and social identity”. (European Reminiscence Network 2020). It is aimed at people with mild and moderate dementia and their family caregivers who are directly involved in the work with creative reminiscence. The whole programme lasts twelve weeks and includes a total of twenty-four hours of teaching. The activities are carried out in small groups, which cover eight to ten families. In addition, there are training sessions for family carers (4 x 45 min.) and/or formal carers (1 x 120 min.) on the implementation of good practices related to creative reminiscence in the living environment of a person with dementia. “The

programme is based on a seemingly preserved storehouse of distant memories. It is a strategy that can work even when short-term memory fails” (Holger, 2013). It should be mentioned here that people with dementia, like all older people, have an ‘autobiographical memory bump’, recall more memories from childhood and adolescence (Morris, 1994). Each session is an encounter with a distant past that was rich in pleasant memories. ‘Unlocking memories’ takes place by thematically related (e.g. childhood and school, leaving home, socializing, getting married, family, traveling) memory triggers, which makes the group “[...] discuss past activities, events and experiences in a pleasant and engaging way” (Woods, 1992). Bearing in mind that memories can be linked to different parts of the brain, there are attempts to integrate many directions of art affecting different senses. Exploration usually takes place by means of role-playing, music, dancing, painting or pantomime which help, for example, participants to recall and demonstrate previous competences and skills. Importantly, sounds, objects and smells are also involved in the process of evoking memories (King, 2020). For example, 80% of people are able to recall memories while experiencing specific smells (Rapiej, 2016). Research shows that stimulation using innovative projects (CBS News, 2015), such as ‘memory units’, ‘memory walls’, ‘memory lane’ and/or 21st-century technologies (e.g. google map, touch screen system, Ipad, Voicing Elder platform), can also help with recall conversations (Alm, et.al., 2004). It should be noted here that the process of recalling past memories can sometimes bring about difficult emotional states, so the personality traits of the leader, his/her skills and his/her style of working with the group are of great importance (Becelewska, 2004, p. 172; Czabała., Sęk, 2000).

Importantly, each meeting is based on a ‘Person-Centred Approach’ which originates in the message “Nothing about me without me” (Corr, 2015). A team led by a facilitator of the European Memory Network with the support of volunteers make efforts:

- “[...] to maintain and improve the quality of life, respecting and preserving the personality of the individual, and taking into account [...] the perspective of how the person with dementia perceives his or her life [...]” (Bredlin, Kitwood, 1992);
- to pay attention to body language and non-verbal communication. Use language and sentence structures that correspond to the level of

understanding, sensory abilities and culture of the individual. (NICE Clinical Guidelines, 2007);

- to pay attention to the activities carried out, which must be available to the individual to achieve the intended purpose;
- to work in partnership with the group, encouraging the social contacts of those who may feel isolated and building trust in those who may be concerned by being the focus of attention (Lancaster University, 2008);
- where possible, to maintain individual contact by paying particular attention to what participants say, giving them time and support to locate and share their own experiences from the past (Lancaster University, 2008);

In addition, the Alzheimer Society recommends that the session should not involve arguing about ‘facts’, but instead focus on the time spent together in a positive way, without one of the parties being ‘right’ (Kensington Place Redwood City, 2020).

### **Therapeutic values of the project “Remembering Yesterday, Caring for Today”**

This extremely interesting project has particular value in the treatment of people living with dementia. Through creative reminiscences and activity, members of the group are involved in the therapeutic process (Wang, 2007). Through relationships, bonds between the participants are formed and consolidated. They are formed “[...] when they feel noticed, listened to and appreciated, when they can take and give without being judged, and when their relationships are a source of support and strength” (Kurzawa 2017). Participation in the RYTC project has a wide range of potential benefits. It can:

- enrich the present by “[...] ‘moving inwards’ to recall memories, discovering beauty in what you have seen, watched [...]” (Kwaśniewska, 2001, pp. 90-102);
- strengthen self-esteem, confidence and competence using the skills they still have;
- develop a sense of common history and personal identity “[...] which places the individual in time and space, gives a sense of being the same, in spite of the changes.” (Pilarska, 2012);

- strengthen the sense of one's own authenticity, independence and freedom;
- build a sense of cohesion within the group, serve to identify common ground and experiences (ERN, 2017);
- stimulate artistic imagination and creativity (Dębska, 2004, p. 231);
- stimulate sensory and emotional memory (Schweitzer, 2020);
- arouse deep emotions, giving the opportunity for self-reflection;
- involve the participant (on the basis of recreated memories) in a spontaneous theatre performance based on his/her own life. On the other hand, a participant who is passively involved can "[...] fill the performance [...] with his own ideas, associations, and define the performance in an individualised way" (Barbara Nowak, 2004, p. 34);
- strengthen intergenerational and intercultural relations within the group;
- renew the mutual understanding between the family caregiver and the charges (ERN, 2017), which is essential in disease related crises;
- increase the level of knowledge of the formal carer about life history, which is necessary for individualised care (Baines, 1987).

At the same time, research shows that the RYCT programme can:

- improve cognitive functions and short-term memory by recalling events and experiences from earlier phases of life (Farrell, O'Philbin, Orrell, 2018);
- increase life expectancy by building a sense of bond, security and belonging to a group (ERN, 2017);
- "[...] improve the mood and reduce agitation and wandering [...]" (AP, 2015);
- be helpful in dealing with depression, which is one of the most common symptoms associated with dementia (Farrell, et al., 2018);
- "have a positive impact, in the social environment, on communication and interaction immediately after the end of the programme, and probably weeks or months later [...]" (Farrell, et.al., 2018);
- improve health promoting behaviours (increased physical activity, good dietary choice or abandoning the abuse of harmful substances) (McKeehan, 2019).

It should be mentioned that the RYTC programme works well within the primary care package as well as in home care. It "[...] has a positive impact

on the quality of life of people with dementia [...] by reducing behavioural problems and emergency admissions to hospital or long-term care homes” (Aguirre, Charlesworth, 2017). This is important information, because as many as 42% of people over 70 years of age and 48% of people over 80 years of age admitted to hospital (in the UK) are diagnosed with dementia (Charlesworth, et.al., 2017).

## Conclusion

The programme of creative reminiscence is a unique form of therapy and support for over 500 000 people living with dementia in our country (Commissioner for Civil Rights Protection, 2020, p. 4) and their family caregivers. The program can be implemented during the work with the persons in the place of their home, in Social Care Homes, in Care and Treatment Centres, in Community Self-Help Centres, in Adoption and Rehabilitation Centres, in Day Care Centres, in Foundations and Associations for People with Alzheimer’s Disease, in Senior Citizens’ Clubs or in Reminiscence Theatres with therapeutic actions.

RYTC, as a non-pharmacological therapy, has broad therapeutic and prophylactic effects that form the basis for an overall better quality of life for people affected by dementia. “To date, no drug has been able to demonstrate such a wide range of effects and the significant added value of having no side effects in practice. These benefits are independent of whether the participant is taking any of the currently available dementia drugs. In fact, creative reminiscence can be even more effective when combined with pharmacological therapy”. (Institut Hospital del Mar d’Investigacions Mèdiques, 2010).

The RYCT programme responds to the challenges of today’s world by surrounding patients with safety, compassion and understanding. It shields the unexplored possibilities of human memory, the power of recollection, and humanity, thereby setting the stage for the further development of scientific disciplines in the social sciences, humanities, medical and health sciences, and the arts. RYCT is a powerful tool that activates people with dementia to remain active members of their own community. It can help to alleviate loneliness and/or social isolation, improve health and well-being and, in a broader perspective, “make [...] their lives [...] despite old age and, often with disabilities, a dignified and valuable phase of life”. (Zych, 2005, p. 53).



**Abstract:** This article describes the therapeutic values of the project “Remembering Yesterday, Caring in Dementia Care” for people living with dementia. Project was established with European Reminiscence Network partners in the European Union, which also operates in the USA, Canada, Latin America, Australia and India. The programme is based on the use of creative reminiscence and interpersonal interaction in reminiscence work to “[...] rediscover and celebrate one’s individuality and social identity”. (European Reminiscence). It can help to alleviate loneliness and/or social isolation, improve health and well-being and, in a broader perspective, “make [...] their lives [...] despite old age and, often with disabilities, a dignified and valuable phase of life”. (Zych, 2005, p. 53).

**Keywords:** Alzheimer’s disease, creative reminiscence in dementia care, dementia/non-pharmacological therapy, life history, Remembering Yesterday, Caring for Today.

**Streszczenie:** W artykule opisano terapeutyczne wartości programu „Pamiętając o Wczoraj, Troszcząc się o Dzisiaj” dla osób żyjących z otępieniem. Projekt powstał z partnerami European Reminiscence Network, która działa nie tylko w krajach Unii Europejskiej, ale również w Stanach Zjednoczonych, Kanadzie, Ameryce Łacińskiej, Australii i Indiach. Program opiera się na użyciu twórczości artystycznej i interakcji międzyludzkiej w pracy z reminiscencją, aby „[...] odkrywać na nowo i celebrować własną indywidualność i społeczną tożsamość” (European Reminiscence Network, 2020). Program może pomóc złagodzić samotność i/lub izolację społeczną, a w szerszej perspektywie – czynić życie, mimo starości i często niepełnosprawności, istnieniem godnym a zarazem wartościową fazą życiową (Zych, 2005).

**Słowa kluczowe:** choroba Alzheimera, historia życia, otępienie/terapia niefarmakologiczna, Pamiętając o Wczoraj, Troszcząc się o Dzisiaj, twórcze wspomnienia w opiece nad otępieniem

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