Creating a ‘Life Story’
Caring for someone with dementia
How Life Story work can help

Everyone has their own unique life story. Our life experiences shape us as individuals, and knowing these helps others to understand who we are as a person.

People with dementia can experience problems with communication and memory loss, which means they sometimes need help to communicate important aspects of who they are, such as their background, interests, and who and what is important to them. A Life Story acts as a record of this information and can be shared with others to help them better understand and relate to the person with dementia.
Compiling a Life Story can:

- help people with dementia share who they are, convey important information about them, and help enhance their sense of identity
- help family members develop a closer bond with the person with dementia through sharing their stories
- give professional carers an understanding of the person’s life, and a better understanding of the person’s needs, allowing them to communicate with the person and care for them in the best way possible
- allow staff in hospitals or a care home to better understand and engage with the person they care for

What does Life Story work look like?

There are several ways that Life Story work can be done, and you can choose the format – or a combination of formats – that works best for the person with dementia. These include:

- Books: this format is portable and can be easily accessible to carers and visitors. Keep it simple with photos and clear, easy-to-read text. Multi-colour and patterns can be confusing for people with dementia, so clear and simple with two contrasting colours is the best approach. It may be a good idea to laminate the final copy to protect it from damage. Many care settings have their own life story book formats so you may need to transfer the information into their template.
- Collages: these are less adaptable as things change. But images work well to encourage reminiscing, and can be useful for people in later stages of dementia.
• DVDs: these are a good way to record visual information, such as family films and messages from the person with dementia to their family, friends and carers. They can also be added to or changed as life changes.

• Reminiscence or memory box: these can be particularly useful for people with sensory impairments, such as sight loss or perceptual problems; or for those people in the later stages of dementia, when touch or smell are relied on more to communicate.

• Apps: there are a number of Apps (downloadable computer programmes for your phone or tablet) to help save and share photos and memories of special places; by marking them on a map, or playing video and audio. They are simple to use and suitable for people in earlier stages of dementia.

• Personal profile documents/one page profiles: these are short versions of a Life Story often used in hospitals designed to help staff understand the person’s needs.
How to create a Life Story

When creating a Life Story, involve the person with dementia in the process as fully as possible. This makes the Life Story more likely to reflect the person’s wishes and preferences, and encourages a sense of ownership. Talk together, help them where needed, and write (or type) the information together so they can see the story forming with you.

Go with the flow and let the person talk about an aspect of their life they are most comfortable with. You do not have to start at the beginning. Try taking one topic at a time so it doesn’t become overwhelming. Take breaks and complete the story at your own pace; it might take days, weeks, or months. Remember you can always add to it later.

If someone finds it difficult to communicate their life story, other family members and friends may be able to provide key information. You can also try to prompt them by using familiar photos of people or places.

Reflecting on our lives can be emotional so sensitivity is needed. Don’t be afraid of this but think carefully about what information the person would want to be shared.
Content of a Life Story

Topics we suggest focusing on are:

• Their profile, i.e. basic information: name, age, where they live etc.
• Significant relationships with family and friends
• Their childhood
• Working life
• Significant places and life events
• Preferences with their appearance
• Food likes and dislikes
• Their routines
• Music/ TV preferences
• Activities they enjoy/don’t like
• General likes and dislikes

Try not to bombard the person with too many specific questions. General questions or opening up the conversation about a topic may be easier. For example: “Can you tell me about where you grew up?”

When the Life Story is completed, share with family, friends and professional carers, so they too can get to know the person better and learn more about how to help them and meet their needs.
You can use Dementia UK’s Life Story Template

This is a flexible document, which can be adapted into a shorter or longer format with photos and pictures. You can download it on our website at www.dementiauk.org/storytemplate

If you have any questions or worries about dementia, you can call the Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline on 0800 888 6678 or email helpline@dementiauk.org. The Helpline is open 9am – 9pm Monday to Friday and 9am – 5pm at weekends.
The information in this booklet is written and reviewed by dementia specialist Admiral Nurses.

We are always looking to improve our resources, to provide the most relevant support for families living with dementia. If you have feedback about any of our leaflets, please email feedback@dementiauk.org

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For more information on how to support Dementia UK, please visit www.dementiauk.org/donate or call 0300 365 5500.

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If you’re caring for someone with dementia or if you have any other concerns or questions, call or email our Admiral Nurses for specialist support and advice.

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Open Monday – Friday, 9am – 9pm
Saturday and Sunday, 9am – 5pm

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