

Using *memory box* objects and smells for people living with dementia: guidance for carers.

Background

There is increasing evidence that certain smells and objects can provide stimulation and make people with dementia feel better. Combined, they are called *object handling*, an approach that uses several senses including smell, sight and touch. Object handling can build good relationships for example by improving communication between loved ones and people living with dementia.

This guidance aims to support family carers who would like to use *memory boxes* containing everyday health and beauty items to improve the wellbeing of loved ones with dementia.

1. *Choosing objects and smells*

Think about things that your loved one enjoys now or in the past, including their preferred smells. You can ask them or find out more about their life or what was popular when they were in their late teens or early 20's. This time in our lives can create powerful memories and is sometimes called the *Reminiscence Bump*.

Smells can be very powerful triggers for memories and emotional responses. Explore what you have at home. For example what smells do you like in your soap or shower gel? Is there a hand cream that you particularly like the smell of or that reminds you of a person or place? Do you have perfume or aftershave bottles or other items like cosmetics or hair-brushes with different colours or textures that may be interesting to handle? Are there brands that have recognisable packaging or logos?

It's good to choose things that people may associate with activities like: going out, hobbies, occupations, parenting or going on holiday as this can stimulate interesting conversation. We've included some ideas below to get you started. Less obvious objects and smells work well too as they can create curiosity.

TIPS: Please check carefully for any allergies or skin sensitivities before starting. We are all different so different items will work for different people. Be aware that people with dementia can have an impaired sense of smell (anosmia) so don't worry if they don't respond. Try to choose items that have strong smells or focus on objects to handle and discuss instead.

Some ideas: Chest Rub (strong eucalyptus smell, evocative of childhood), Old Spice cologne (classic mens fragrance); lavender talc (relaxing smell and classic formula); clove oil (strong smell, associated with pain relief); TCP ointment (active ingredient has a strong smell, associated with parenting and childhood).

2. *How to use object handling (objects and smells) with someone who has dementia*

Prepare the space you are in. You might want to clear other items or smells away (e.g. air fresheners or cooking) and ensure you won't be disturbed for 30 minutes. This will create space and quality time for you and the person you care for.

Place the selected items (6-8 is a good number to ensure variety) in a box or case. This creates a sense of mystery and anticipation. Let your loved one know that you'd like to spend time exploring some interesting items together.

Start by presenting an item to your loved one or let them choose one from the box.

Note how the person interacts with the object and its smell. Encourage the person to handle and examine the object, including smelling it. Allow them time to do this. Leave around 2-5 minutes before introducing another smell. This ensures that one smell can be distinguished from another.

Observe their responses- verbal and non-verbal. You can ask questions like: Do you like it? Does it have a smell? Allow the person to comment if they wish.

When they are finished, you can handle the object and smell it as well and make comments, responding to what your loved one said or did. If the object doesn't interest the person or they don't respond, you can move onto another one in the box.

TIPS: Allow time for the person to explore the object and its smell. Let them lead the activity as much as possible. Don't ask if they know what it is or what it is for as they may feel like they are being tested. Value non-verbal as well as verbal responses. You could use scented hand cream to give your loved one a hand massage. This is relaxing and helps build the caring relationship.

FEEDBACK Let us know how you get on here [\[link to website form\]](#)

What worked well? What didn't work? What are your favourite products to include? Did anything surprise you? What are your top tips for using *memory boxes* with people who have dementia?

Read more here:

Boots memory boxes see <https://www.boots-uk.com/our-stories/treasured-items-from-the-boots-uk-archive-help-to-rekindle-memories-in-people-with-dementia/>

Griffiths, S., Denning, T., Beer, C. and Tischler, V. (2016): Mementos from Boots multisensory boxes– Qualitative evaluation of an intervention for people with dementia: Innovative practice. *Dementia* <https://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/3211/1/Mementos%20from%20Boots.pdf>

Herz, R. S. (2006): The Role of Odor-Evoked Memory in Psychological and Physiological Health Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5039451/>

Stafford, T. (2012) Why can smells unlock forgotten memories? <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20120312-why-can-smells-unlock-memories>

Tischler, V. and Clapp, S. (2019) Multi-sensory potential of archives in dementia care <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23257962.2019.1675147?journalCode=cjsa21>

Prepared by: Professor Victoria Tischler and Federica d'Andrea, University of West London