'The spark will ignite': how poetry helps engage people with dementia

Shared reading has a significant impact on mood, concentration and social interaction. A Liverpool charity is running sessions in care homes

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‘People help each other read aloud, and begin to share past memories.’

With lifted feet, hands still / I am poised, and down the hill / Dart, with heedful mind / The air goes by in a wind

Stephanie Brada reads the Henry Charles Beeching poem Going Down Hill on a Bicycle to a group of residents at a care home. They read along with her, some mouthing the words, others silently following the print-outs on their laps.

“Michael, did you ever have a bike?” Brada asks one of the men sitting across from her.

“Yes,” he replies. “I rode it to work.”

This might be unremarkable in another setting, but the 10 participants of this reading group at Stapely care home in Liverpool all have dementia. Moments of clarity can be rare. After some discussion of bicycles and riding down hills, another poem is read – My Grandmother’s African Grey by Matt Simpson. Unprompted, another resident starts talking about her grandparents’ parrot.

“She never normally says anything,” Brada says afterwards. “Some have quite severe dementia but if they can see [the poem], they can read aloud.”

More than one million people in the UK are expected to have dementia by 2025, while 70% of people in care homes have dementia or severe memory problems.

Despite being one of the main causes of disability in later life , the UK spends much less on treating it than cancer, heart disease and strokes.
A number of innovative techniques have been tried by care homes to engage those with dementia, including virtual reality therapy, opera and standup comedy. Reading poems aloud – or shared reading – can have a significant impact on residents' mood, concentration and social interaction.
Brada has led shared reading groups at Stapely since 2015 and – with two other volunteers – now runs three groups a week. During each one-hour session, three poems are read aloud multiple times by the residents, and then discussed. Care home trustee Philip Ettinger says staff attend the groups themselves if they can spare the time.
"Staff get a buzz from it," he says. "It's a privilege to witness the joy on residents' faces as they realise they can still get great satisfaction from reading aloud together."

The groups are the brainchild of Liverpudlian charity The Reader, which first worked with a care home in 2006. In 2016-17 the organisation ran 514 shared reading groups around the country – 15% of which were in care homes or community groups for people with dementia. Other participants might face issues such as mental health conditions, chronic pain, isolation or recovery from substance misuse. Supported by a £850,000 grant from the Big Lottery Fund, The Reader has plans to recruit more volunteers and double the number of shared reading groups around the UK over the next three years.
"Our founder wanted to get literature out into the community where people really needed it," says Kate McDonnell, the charity's head of reading excellence. "[For] people with dementia ... to find your voice in somebody else's words is incredibly powerful."
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McDonnell admits that, initially, there were concerns the model wouldn't work in a care home setting. Other groups had responded well to novels or short stories, but it quickly became clear that prose wouldn't be suitable.
"I looked around at all of these puzzled faces," she says, about reading a short story to the first group. "I had A Red, Red Rose by Robert Burns in my bag. As soon as I started reading, it was like an electric current went around the room. One lady, who had been hunched over in her wheelchair the whole time, lifted her head and beamed."
Relatives who join in often comment on the impact it can have on their loved ones. "Another time, a lady with quite advanced dementia talked about something that had happened in her life," says McDonnell. "Her daughter was completely amazed. She said: 'I thought I'd lost my mum forever, but I've just had another glimpse of her'."
The poetry blows on embers, says McDonnell, "and you never know where that spark is going to ignite".
Poetry resonates particularly well with those with dementia, agrees Philip Davis, the director of the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society at the University of Liverpool. He has researched the benefits of shared reading in care homes for more than five years and thinks that part of the appeal may be that this generation once learned poems by heart at school. But Davis believes it's more than that – there's power in the rhythm, the strength of the language, and the shortness of

the attention span required to understand poetry. The shared element of the reading also makes all the difference.
“There’s an active, shared engagement. It’s shared emotion that recreates a small community again,” he says. “People help each other read aloud, and begin to share past memories. The aim is to reach the deeper part [of residents] that are often hidden from themselves and others.”


Reeling in the years: dementia-friendly screenings make cinema accessible to all

Care homes can be quite lonely places, Brada adds. “But reading enables conversations, and gives them something to think about other than ‘when’s lunch?’ You could write people with dementia off. Or you could put a poem in front of them to see what happens.”

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