

# Creating a life story for a person with dementia



Our own unique life experiences shape us as individuals, and sharing these with others helps them understand who we are as a person. A 'life story' is a record of someone's life that can be used to support people with dementia in reminiscing about their past, reflecting on what matters to them now, and communicating this to others.

### **How life story work can help people with dementia**

People with dementia often experience problems with communication and memory. Life stories can be very beneficial in helping them recall important aspects of their life and communicate these to other people, creating opportunities for connection and interaction.

Compiling a life story can:

- Help people with dementia share who they are and convey important information about themselves, their history, their likes and interests, and the things that matter to them
- Enhance the person's sense of identity and give their life meaning
- Encourage reminiscence, which can help them retrieve memories
- Create a sense of enjoyment and contentment through thinking about happy times and the things that bring them pleasure
- Help family members develop a closer bond with the person with dementia through sharing their stories
- Give carers, care home staff, and health and social care professionals a better understanding of the person's life – this can help them provide better care, enable meaningful conversations and activities, and make the person feel valued and respected



Even if the person with dementia has significant memory loss, a life story is a reminder that they are still the person they used to be, with a rich history and their own experiences, likes, dislikes and values. It can help you and others see the person behind the condition.

### What does life story work look like?

There are several ways of producing a life story, and you can choose the format – or combination of formats – that works best for the person with dementia.

**Books:** this format is portable and easily accessible to carers and visitors. Keep it simple with clear, easy-to-read text and photos. Different colours and patterns can be confusing for people with dementia, so it is best to stick to one font and size and use no more than two contrasting colours.

It is a good idea to laminate the pages of the book to protect it from damage. Alternatively, you could compile the information inside

## 4 Dementia UK

---

punched pockets in a ring binder or print it as a photobook. You can also buy pre-formatted life story books to fill in, but these can be expensive and give you less flexibility over what you include.

Many care settings have their own life story formats so you may need to transfer some of the information into their template as well.

**Collages or memory boards:** images often work well to encourage reminiscing and can be useful for people in the later stages of dementia who have difficulty reading. As well as photos of important people, places and occasions, you can include other items such as postcards, tickets, pictures printed from the internet and newspaper or magazine clippings.

Bear in mind that collages and memory boards may be harder to adapt and add to over time. They are also less portable than a book, so may need to remain in the person's home rather than being taken with them in the case of a hospital admission, for example.

**Videos:** these are a good way to collate visual and audio information such as family films, messages to and from the person with dementia, meaningful music, and recordings of video calls. They also enable family and friends who the person sees less often to contribute, such as relatives who live overseas. You can add to the recording over time – for example if the person with dementia uncovers a new memory, or if another person wants to record a message for them.

**Reminiscence or memory boxes:** these can be particularly useful for people with sensory impairments such as sight loss or perceptual problems, or for people in the later stages of dementia who rely more on touch or smell to communicate and connect. They can include a variety of objects such as:



- photos and postcards
- souvenirs from holidays
- items associated with the person's work
- toys from the person's own past or their children's
- theatre or sports programmes or tickets
- ornaments and trinkets
- jewellery
- toiletries
- items of clothing

**Apps:** there are a number of apps that you can download to your phone or tablet so you can compile and save photos, videos, and audio recordings. These are usually simple to use but may be more

suitable for people in the earlier stages of dementia who are able to understand and use the technology, with support if necessary.

**Personal profiles/one-page profiles:** these are short versions of a life story containing a brief summary of the most important information about the person. They are often used in hospitals to help staff understand the person's needs.

### How to create a life story

When creating a life story, always be led by the person with dementia. Involve them as much as you can, or as much as they want. It should reflect the person's wishes and preferences and encourage a sense of ownership. For example, let the person make a comment about a photograph and use their words as the caption – remember it is their story, not yours.

Help the person where necessary and compile the information together so they can see the story forming. Go with the flow and let the person talk about any aspect of their life that they want to. You do not have to start at the beginning or work in chronological order, and you do not have to include everything about their life – just what is most meaningful.

Try taking one topic at a time so the task does not become overwhelming. Take breaks and complete the story at the person's own pace; it might take days, weeks or months, and you can keep coming back to it to add new information.

You can also involve other important people in compiling the life story, for example the person's children or grandchildren. This can create special moments to connect with each other and enrich the person's life story.

Life stories are not just about the past – they also capture key



information about the person with dementia at the present time. The life story can remain ‘live’ so you can keep adding to it to help other people better understand and relate to the person.

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, for example by showing them photos or videos or playing familiar music, but bear in mind that there may be information about the person’s life that you do not know about in detail.

Reflecting on our lives can be emotional, so be cautious and approach the activity with sensitivity. Some memories may make the person think about unhappy times and evoke past trauma, create a sense of loss, or cause distress. Do not be afraid to explore these issues if the person with dementia wishes to, as this information can help their family, friends and carers identify if changes in behaviour

are linked to memories of a specific event, such as an anniversary. But do think carefully about what information the person would want to share and when it may or may not be appropriate to do so.

For example, you may wish to have one version of the life story for family and close friends, and a second, briefer version to share with carers. You may also wish to keep these sections separate from the main life story, so they do not detract from the person reminiscing about happier times.

### What to include in a life story

You may wish to include:

- the person's profile and basic information: name (including how they like to be addressed), date of birth, age, where they live etc
- significant relationships with family, friends, colleagues and pets
- their first language and other languages spoken
- religious, spiritual or cultural beliefs and routines
- their sexuality/sexual and gender preferences
- any physical or mental health conditions
- details of their childhood, adolescence and education
- details of their working life/voluntary work
- their achievements
- important places, eg places they have lived; places of study; holiday destinations; workplaces; their children's school, college or university
- important life events such as weddings, birth of children or grandchildren, house moves, new jobs



- preferences with their appearance, including what they like to wear, any religious or cultural dress, how they like to have their hair and make-up, jewellery, favourite toiletries etc
- food likes and dislikes, although be aware that these may change as dementia progresses
- present routines and routines from the past
- favourite music/TV/films
- activities they enjoy/do not enjoy, including sports and sports teams
- occasions that they like to celebrate eg birthdays, anniversaries, religious festivals
- values
- general likes and dislikes

Try not to bombard the person with too many specific questions. It may be easier to ask more general questions or open up a conversation about a topic and let them direct the course it takes – for example, “Can you tell me about where you grew up?”

When the life story is completed, share it with family, friends and professional carers so they can get to know the person better and learn more about how to help them and meet their needs.

You may like to 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 at [▶ dementiauk.org/life-story-template](https://dementiauk.org/life-story-template)



## Sources of support

If you are living with dementia or caring for someone with the condition, register for our free online sessions, ‘Dementia: what next?’ at [▶ dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next](https://dementiauk.org/dementia-what-next)

To contact our free Dementia Helpline, call **0800 888 6678** (Monday–Friday 9am–9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am–5pm, every day except 25<sup>th</sup> December) or email [▶ helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

If you prefer, you can book a phone or video call with an Admiral Nurse at a time to suit you: please visit [▶ dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

### Dementia UK resources

#### Changing relationships and roles

[▶ dementiauk.org/changing-relationships-and-roles](https://dementiauk.org/changing-relationships-and-roles)

#### Music therapy

[▶ dementiauk.org/music](https://dementiauk.org/music)

#### Supporting children and adolescents when a parent has young onset dementia

[▶ dementiauk.org/supporting-children-and-adolescents-when-a-parent-has-young-onset-dementia](https://dementiauk.org/supporting-children-and-adolescents-when-a-parent-has-young-onset-dementia)

#### Tips for better communication

[▶ dementiauk.org/better-communication](https://dementiauk.org/better-communication)

#### When someone stops recognising you

[▶ dementiauk.org/when-someone-doesnt-recognise-you](https://dementiauk.org/when-someone-doesnt-recognise-you)

**To speak to a dementia specialist Admiral Nurse  
about any aspect of dementia:**

Contact our Helpline:  
**0800 888 6678** or [👉 helpline@dementiauk.org](mailto:helpline@dementiauk.org)

Book a virtual appointment:  
[👉 dementiauk.org/book](https://dementiauk.org/book)

**Our charity relies entirely on donations to fund our  
life-changing work. If you would like to donate to help us  
support more families:**

- Call **0300 365 5500**
- Visit [👉 dementiauk.org/donate](https://dementiauk.org/donate)
- Scan the QR code



**Thank you.**



**DementiaUK**  
Helping families face dementia



**dementiauk.org • info@dementiauk.org**

Publication date: January 2025. Review date: January 2028. © Dementia UK 2025

Dementia UK, 7<sup>th</sup> Floor, One Aldgate, London EC3N 1RE  
Dementia UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1039404) and Scotland (SC 047429).