

KEEPING THE LOVE OF READING ALIVE FOR MAVIS

Author Anne Vize has just published a book of selected pieces suitable for reading aloud with clients suffering from dementia, called *Reading in the Moment*. She also has some great advice for facilitators just starting out in the provision of bibliotherapy programs.

Mavis is a woman in her late eighties who has been a regular visitor to her local library for many years. She has always been bright and animated, and has made good friends with many of the staff.

But lately things have begun to change for Mavis. She has been getting lost in areas where she was previously confident, and is having trouble managing her daily activities. Although she still comes to the library, the staff have noticed she now has great difficulty with the catalogue, and often forgets what she is trying to find or do. A recent diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease as being the cause of her difficulties has left Mavis and her family feeling shocked.

Can something be done to support Mavis and help her continue to gain pleasure from reading?

The short term memory loss which is often a stand out feature of dementia conditions such as Alzheimer's disease can have an impact on the ability of a person to read for pleasure. Tasks such as reading and comprehending a passage of text, whether it be prose, poetry, biography or regular 'round the home' text such as recipes and instructions, becomes more challenging with short term memory loss. Information is not retained easily, and links are not able to be made between one section of text and another.

Characters can become blurred and the plot fragmented, while features such as extended metaphor and the use of simile hold less meaning and impact. But reading is still physically and cognitively possible, and more importantly, enjoyment of reading can still be maintained by a person who has dementia.

Choice of material becomes critical for a successful reading experience. The wrong material can leave a person feeling overwhelmed and confused, but a piece which has been well-chosen can have a positive and important effect on mood, behavior and communication.



Let's take a look at some useful strategies that can help guide the selection of reading material and create a positive reading situation for a library user who is experiencing short term memory loss caused by dementia.

Sharing the reading experience provides an opportunity for communication and social interaction, and increases the complexity of the material which can be enjoyed by the older person, while reading aloud in a clear, peaceful and unhurried voice can encourage the user to listen.

The location for the reading experience is important. The user needs to feel physically comfortable as well as emotionally safe and content.

Stories or articles with a small number of characters, who are clearly named and present throughout the piece, and a straightforward plot will help lessen the risk of confusion. Although a piece with a lower reading level may be useful, this does require careful selection, as it is all too easy to select a piece which might be seen as demeaning or insulting in your quest to find a piece which is manageable for the reader.

A piece which can be read in around ten minutes or so is often ideal; this allows for several pieces to be shared in a single reading session and attention is more likely to be maintained for a short duration than when reading a lengthy piece.

Finally, look out for content with a good 'read aloud' factor – some pieces just cry out to be read aloud, while others are better suited to solitary reading. Selecting a piece which sounds wonderful aloud, and which can be read in a melodic, interesting and relaxed fashion can be effective.

In the United Kingdom, many public libraries offer memory groups to borrowers who have dementia. These sessions provide a meaningful and safe social activity in a welcoming and often familiar environment within the local community. There have also been some very successful trials of similar programs here in Australia, with trained reading group facilitators leading reading sessions for clients in a variety of settings.

Fortunately Mavis lives in an area where a day respite facility has begun offering a shared reading program for clients who use their service. Mavis has found shared reading is an activity that brings her pleasure and helps her feel a valued part of her new social group. Gradually, Mavis' family have noticed the return of some of her old sparkle and zing, and that she seems calmer and more communicative when they arrive to collect her at the end of the day.

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