

St Cuthbert's: Memory Box for church or home.

Model for a memory box in church or at home.

What is a memory box?

Memories that are dimmed or thought to be lost forever can be stimulated by the prompting the contents of a memory box can bring.

Carefully chosen, the items placed within the box can cause that 'feel good' factor to emerge from within the person living with dementia and connect them with happy, comforting emotions.

The box and its contents can cue conversations and take people living with dementia back to childhood or a meaningful time in their life.

A person living with dementia needs visual signposting to be clear and minimalist to reduce further confusion.

There needs to be a meaningful attraction, and an element of intrigue to a box.

A memory box can be themed or personalised.

Choosing a box.

A memory box should be sturdy, lightweight wood or firm card as it needs to withstand much handling.

For our church memory box, we have chosen a box which resembles an old book. The spine looks traditionally leather bound, and its cover is vibrant with butterflies.

The butterflies are easily seen, and each has a border around it which provides a focus and prevents it from looking too 'busy' or confusing. The butterfly provides a calming vision.

It is 28 x21 cm, a good size to see, handle with ease and hold several items of interest.

In general, we would automatically open a book; they are very tactile items. It is attractive.

N.B a memory box can be wall mounted to be visual only and stimulate conversation, but there is no tactile stimulation here, and other objects within the church can create this effect, such as the altar, the font, the bell tower, the flower arrangements.

What do we put in it?

The contents can be anything significant to the individual, and the boxes can be themed.

Our box is themed to connect with spirituality and our faith.

Its contents will stimulate conversation and stir emotions.

Contents:

A Bible with clear print, a holding cross, prayer beads and a prayer card, some prose and prayers on cards with calming pictures. There are postcards of our church, pictures of flowers, nature, family and children playing/praying. For intrigue, we have a scarf with doves on it: this is silky and very tactile, and is left hanging out of the box to encourage that inquisitive nature to open the book/box.

Items will be replaced as needed.

Why / how does it work?

Remember the model below based on Tom Kitwood's psychological model of care?

The model shows '5 psychological needs' all centred around love, which if included within our lives will holistically meet our needs.

By using the model, we give the dignity and respect deserved by each unique individual, recognising the importance of every person's family, social history and their personality.

A memory box can help trigger all those wonderful feelings and emotions. When the facts are disappearing, the emotion lingers on.

An item in the box may trigger a memory, and will always trigger an emotion if it is meaningful.

A memory box can be used independently or with someone to support a meaningful conversation.

As we learned from the bookcase analogy in our Dementia Friends sessions, memories disappear, starting with the most recent such as, what you had for lunch. But the longer term memories remain, although they gradually decrease chronologically, ending with childhood memories as the disease process progresses.

Although the facts may go, the emotion linked to those facts, will always remain: some nice and some not so nice.

Remember the amygdalae, the two structures in the temporal lobe that are responsible for memory and emotions? The memory box will trigger a response from this part of the brain.

If the fact has gone, the emotion will remain: that is why it is important to leave a person with a good feeling.

How to use a memory box.

The box can be used independently.

Each time I hold my prize- giving Bible, I am immediately transported back to 1961 and me as a 5-year-old, reciting my piece of scripture in front of the congregation. I can still feel my heart pounding, and the relief when it was all over, but great joy that I had completed it and seeing my parents' and sister's proud faces smiling up at me. It was 'Genesis, chapter 1', and I can still recite it verbatim.

A person living with dementia may use their memory box like this, or sit with a loved one, friend or carer to talk about the items. This meaningful activity will need more and more prompting as the disease progresses.

Tactile items are important. I am very comforted grasping my holding cross or prayer beads.

As beautiful as illuminated letters and gothic writings are, they may cause frustration to a person living with dementia. Less is more in this case, and the simpler the better. Busy decorative items can be misinterpreted i.e. swirls can resemble snakes. Deteriorating eyesight can lead to the frustration of not being able to see writing easily.

The story of the creation is beautiful, and pictures of nature, flowers and scenic views create a sense of peace, calm and comfort.

As memories slide further towards our childhood, we may remember Noah, Jonah and Zacchaeus, so a soft spongy whale or some small wooden animals may be good triggers.

It is important to make sure items are safe and clean.

It is important that we change items if they do not create stimulation any more.

When a person cannot attend church, the memory box is an excellent way to support faith and spirituality. Simply holding a hand or looking at a calming picture or cross whilst saying a prayer can create that calm within. The eyes or body language may show a glint of a smile or simply look calm and peaceful.

If you are supporting a dementia friendly service, a memory box may be used by people living with dementia to allow them be included in the service such as adding items to a Christmas memory box as the story unfolds, e.g. figures, representations of gold, frankincense, myrrh, and a star!

Make sure the contents of the box fulfil the essential needs of attachment, identity, comfort, inclusion and provide meaningful occupation. Shared with love, the memory box will most certainly support the wellbeing and spirituality of a person living with dementia. This themed box will help support a person's faith to the end of their dementia journey.

