

HOW TO KEEP MEMORIES ALIVE AND MAINTAIN INDEPENDENCE

You care for an elderly parent, relative or sick friend. Perhaps you call, to brighten up their day. Maybe you do much more. Bringing happiness to their life is very rewarding but can sometimes be challenging.

However, you can't be there all the time. Studies show that loneliness and social isolation can impact gravely on quality of life and well-being. There's a significant and lasting effect on blood pressure [1], and links to poor sleep [2], dementia & Alzheimer's [3], depression [4] and higher mortality rates [5]. What can you do?

Konnekt's series of articles helps you improve the quality of life for the elderly or sick you care about. In this **part 1**, we share suggestions on how to keep memories alive, maintain high self-esteem and promote independence.

Thanks for the Memories

Thanks to better nutrition, advances in medical science and aged-care initiatives, Australians now expect to live over 80 years. In 2014, Australian women were reported to have the seventh-highest life expectancy in the world with a life expectancy of 84.6 years, beaten by only six other countries in a table led by Japan. Australian men can expect to reach an average of 80.5 years, which places them on the worldwide podium just behind Iceland and Switzerland.

A long life, however, means nothing without quality of life. Many of us have seen friends and relatives develop symptoms of dementia at comparatively younger ages. What can we do to help our loved ones stay mentally nimble for longer and cope better when memories start to fade?

Thankfully, there are many things you can do, easily and cheaply, to help. The adage "use it or lose it" applies to human memory, so our first suggestions will help exercise the grey matter and reinforce the most important memories.

Happy-snap family tree. Collect and print photos of your loved one's extended family and close friends, and place them in a logical arrangement onto a cork-board. Hang your work-of-art where it will be seen often, such as above the home phone.

Try to find pictures that include favourite possessions, such as a musical instruments or sports gear, and in familiar settings such as a family Christmas party, to help trigger memories. Choose happy snaps over serious poses because current research (and common sense) shows that a smile is contagious: A grin can lift not only your own mood, but also the moods of those around us. In fact, it is associated with a lower risk of stroke [6] and could even lengthen our lives [7]. The act of smiling releases neuropeptides such as dopamine, endorphins and serotonin – tiny molecules that allow neurons to communicate – that help fight stress and can lower your blood pressure.

Beneath each photo, write each person's name and relationship to your loved one (for example, "Aunty Flo" or "Son John") and perhaps their phone number. Reading the names will reinforce their most important memories. Seeing the numbers will give them confidence that they can call, even after an electrical fault or flat battery wipes their telephone's speed-dial memory.

Challenge a younger person to create the whole photo collage digitally! Chances are that most of the photos can be found online on social media such as Facebook, Flickr or Instagram, or can be extracted from the family hard drives, SD cards and USB sticks. There are many apps such as "Pic Collage", "CollageMaker", "Fotor" and "Collagelt" for your tablet, mobile or computer.

Now that you've collected the photos, why not go all the way? Digital photo frames can be purchased from only \$5 for a 1.5" key-ring frame, \$40 for a 7" slide-show model (about the same price as a large metallic photo-collage frame) or \$150-\$200 for a huge 15" frame that can also display home-video clips, play music, tell you the time and date and remind you to take a nap. You can even find Internet photo frames that can be updated remotely from any browser.

- Choose your photos carefully so that faces are large and easy to recognize at a distance.
- Use your computer, Smartphone, or camera photo-editing software (or even Microsoft Paint) to crop each image to about the right aspect ratio – we suggest you use the frame in portrait mode to display one person at a time.
- Paste-in one line of memory-jogger text, such as "Grandson Luke at 8 with his new puppy Rex", in a large font size.
- Finally, copy the photos onto a USB stick or the frame's internal memory, and set the photo transition rate to about 10 seconds to allow time to read the text.

We have personally used digital photo frames to display photos without text. It feels so good to see our loved ones smile each time they spot a new happy snap but a little sad when they can't quite place the face. Please invest the time to add a few words.

Remove the stress from technology. Everyday tasks can be a challenge to the memory. Here's how to make appliances and devices work for you:

- Tape step-by-step instructions next to the microwave, the oven, the TV and the air conditioner remote. You might like to explain that it's mostly to help *you* when you visit because your own home appliances are different. Being able to make your own breakfast, cook a microwave meal for lunch, re-heat coffee, watch the news and stay cool – without a support call to the family – is vital for self-esteem.
- Most remotes have many tiny black buttons on a black background. It's easy to inadvertently leave the TV stuck in an unwanted AV-input mode. Buy a universal, six-button remote for the TV: Power, volume up & down, channel up & down and perhaps mute. Buy two or three of them, and buy a few sets of spare batteries. If you can, re-program the TV to remove unwanted foreign-language, music-only and shopping channels.

It can be hard to find a remote that has only a few, big, brightly coloured buttons. Search sites for the elderly and vision-impaired such as <http://www.visionaustralia.org>, <http://www.tvremotes.com.au> and <http://ilcaustralia.org.au>, as well as eBay and the common Australian shopping sites, for "TV remotes for the elderly" or models such as "Tek Pal", "SEKI" and "Doro HandleEasy" for \$30-75.

- Keep your loved ones doing chores as long as possible. This is exactly the opposite of what you might be tempted to do! Certainly, you should remove the more dangerous chores as they become too risky, but encourage your loved ones to continue to own the tasks that work the brain and the body, that help them retain a sense of independence and usefulness, and that allow them to do things for you when you visit. For example, watering the garden using a hose can be very therapeutic, as long as there is not a high risk of falling. Making coffee can be made safer by using a modern plastic kettle or, better still, a filtered-coffee machine that drips hot (not boiling) water through a paper filter.
- Introduce them to new technology and new routines early, well before they need it. When they forget how to use their old, complicated microwave, it might be too late to teach them to use a newer, simple microwave... or TV, or alarm clock, or music system.

KONNEKT VIDEOPHONE KEEPS MEMORIES ALIVE

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Conclusion

In this article, we've shown you how to help your loved ones keep memories alive, maintain a high self-esteem and promote independence by constructing a happy-snap family tree and by making it easier to use appliances and attend to chores. In the **next article** of our series, we'll help you **stop unwanted callers** and **protect against fraud** with some easy tips and clever products and services.

Konnekt is an Australian company that has developed an incredibly simple, one-touch Videophone. The elderly and sick can talk **face-to-face** with family and friends, as often as they want, without the travel. To learn about the Konnekt Videophone or to subscribe to receive future Konnekt articles with tips to help improve quality of life, visit Konnekt at www.konnekt.com.au.

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