

Touch – a much misunderstood aspect of care

“Well, we’re told we are not supposed to hug them, but sometimes you just can’t help it!”

I heard this said by a member of staff in a dementia care home whilst working as a massage therapist. Having now discussed the subject of touch with hundreds of care staff this kind of statement is now quite familiar to me. Hearing it the first time, however, really struck me and prompted me to reflect on a number of questions:

Who had instructed her that affectionate forms of touch were prohibited? How would I feel if I were one of “them”? Why had the member of staff found this instruction impossible to follow? Why is a massage acceptable but a hug prohibited? What is the difference between a hug and a massage from the perspective of the recipient? How might the experience of cognitive impairment shape this perspective?

Given that some kind of physical contact is a central part of care work these questions are relevant to all care providers. In fact images of affectionate physical contact pervade almost all care providers’ marketing material. Google “care homes” on the Internet and most of the images that appear involve affectionate touch.

Care providers find it hard to convey a caring intent without recourse to images of affectionate physical contact because it is a native element of caring relationships. Touch has always been a natural way of reassuring someone in distress and an effective means of

conveying empathy.

Yet care providers confidently employing such images in the market place do not have the same confidence in practise; care staff can be instructed to withhold affectionate physical contact; safe guarding concerns can be raised on occasions of it’s use. Contradictory views on touch are often conveyed within the same care setting. Is an aversion to affectionate physical contact (counter intuitive to most carers) the result of the professionalisation of care? If this is the case we risk dehumanising care.

What is a “professional” approach to touch if it is not touch averse? I believe it is an informed approach with the insight to clarify the role of touch in dementia care; the confidence to maximise the benefits of touch and the awareness to minimise the potential of abuse.

Maximising the benefits of touch in dementia care requires an understanding of:

- The distinction between task oriented and expressive touch and their implications for personhood;

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- Touch as a form of non-verbal communication;
- The key factors which shape our experience of touch;
- The role of touch in relationships;
- The role of relationships in person centred care.

Minimising the potential of abuse also requires an understanding of:

- The key bodily indicators of non-verbal consent to touch
- The experience of touch from the perspective of someone with a cognitive impairment;
- The role touch plays in the malignant social psychology of dementia.

I offer this model as an alternative to a cynical or ambivalent professional approach to touch in care. The model is optimistic but not naïve. It requires us to engage in a rigorous enquiry into the realities of touch in care. With this understanding of touch care providers can ensure that their use of touch really conveys their caring intent. **CT**

Research points to the benefits of song sessions

UK charity Sing For Your Life has released the findings of a joint three month research study by Kent & Medway NHS Partnership Trust which demonstrates the benefits of regular singing sessions to people with dementia.

The research findings demonstrated that the Silver Song Club Music Box, which was used as part of the structured singing sessions, helped people to engage positively, irrespective of their physical or communication ability. Levels of challenging behaviour were reduced during the trial period by more than 50%.

During the singing sessions, staff found they were able to provide enhanced person-centred-care because the environment stimulated social interaction, therefore enabling staff to learn more about their residents. The singing, in many instances, helped people to communicate and triggered personal memories, which enhanced mood and social involvement.

Staff were encouraged to use the Silver Song Music Box, provided by the charity, Sing For Your Life, on a regular basis and at times

when episodes of challenging behaviour were likely to occur. It was also suggested that the music box should be used at parties and other social events as an alternative test environment.

Improvements in mood and social engagement were frequently noted for residents, relatives and staff. It was also noted by staff and relatives how the atmosphere changed and relatives were moved to see their often ‘locked-in’ family member enjoying themselves and remembering old songs. For many, the Silver Song Club Music Box encouraged them to communicate for the first time in many years.

The lessons learnt from the research indicates that the regular provision of singing activities can have significant impact on wellbeing and reduce levels of risk to patients and staff significantly.

The summary conclusion was that the provision/attendance of regular Silver Song Box Music sessions can have a significant impact on resident wellbeing. There may also be an impact on the general atmosphere as a

result of positive interactions between residents, carers and relatives.

Sing For Your Life founder Stuart Brown said the Silver Song Music Box had the potential, in some instances to replace antipsychotic drugs, both in terms of enhancing mood and reducing incidents of challenging behaviour.

“Once again, medical research has proved that participatory singing is an intervention which will assist a person with dementia to communicate,” said Mr Brown.

“They might not sing, but they are likely to interact in some way to the music which is positive experience for them. A moment of lucidity and calm.

Since the trial, Kent and Medway NHS Partnership Trust has purchased four Silver Song Club Music Boxes. Hosted Silver Song Clubs are now regularly used by a range of NHS facilities and care homes across the UK, Europe and Canada. **CT**

■ For more information about Sing For Your Life, visit <http://singforyourlife.org.uk> or email info@singforyourlife.org.uk