Creating new futures with stories

My Home Life (MHL) aims to promote and enhance quality of life for older people living and dying in care homes, and for those visiting and working in them. This briefing paper sets outs some of the ways that MHL works with stories as a key element of relationship-centred practice, appreciative inquiry, evaluation and engagement with health and social care partners.

Stories tell us what matters to people

Stories are descriptive first-person accounts of something that has happened or which is desired that tell us what matters to people. Feelings are often expressed through stories and we can be profoundly moved, making us curious to find out more. In this way, stories provide new insights and help to shape deeper understanding of other peoples’ experience. Considering other people’s perspectives, helps us to work better together to shape how things are done. Sharing stories is the bedrock of relationship-centred practice. When people talk with each other about high points or challenges, they naturally build empathy, mutuality, respect, trust and genuineness — in short, they build high quality relationships and provide the insight and empathy needed for action.

Many ways of gathering stories

Storytelling is a key part of everyday life; although stories are often told informally, dismissed as anecdotal, or simply lost. All the Caring Conversations Framework approaches and tools, including using images and emotional touchpoints are useful ways to elicit stories, enhance relationships and promote better partnership working. These offer a wider emotional vocabulary that supports people to share their inner thoughts and feelings and both invite and express views which they might previously have felt to be ‘tricky’ to share or just difficult to put into words. Given the prevalence of cognitive frailty amongst residents (and some relatives) ‘conversation’ might include being especially attentive to the many ways in which people with advanced dementia continue to convey the things that matter to them.

So what, now what?

In appreciative inquiry, stories are sought with a purpose. The four stages of appreciative inquiry in Figure 1 (see over the page) offer a way of thinking about the purpose and usefulness of different kinds of stories.
Using stories for evidence and engagement

Stories are an integral part of MHL’s approach to collaborative learning and evaluation that can help us capture new ways of thinking and more meaningful ways of acting.\(^5\) Noticing and recording small changes in practice, different ways people are engaging, changes in the atmosphere, as well as other tangible outcomes, can all provide evidence of change. Use the MHL Improving Experience Template to capture some of these stories of change and build a portfolio of evidence, for evaluation and promotion and for quality inspection by the regulator and commissioner.

Gathering and sharing stories and making links between them often allows new meaning to emerge. It is a good way to engage wide health and social care partners in dialogue, explore the linkages and trace the ‘ripple effect’ beyond the immediate care setting. Such story sharing will prompt further stories from others and enhance mutual understanding of each other’s context. In this way, by sharing our stories, we can help to create a ‘community of inquiry’ amongst our partners to create and sustain the relationships and connections and enhance the mutually reinforcing contributions that need to be made.

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(Endnotes)


