

RISH Conference notes

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Slide One

This presentation draws on a study undertaken for the Abbeyfield Society in 2014/5. I was commissioned to design, carry out and report on how the spiritual needs of staff and residents are and could be addressed, such that people are nurtured and can thrive. In the event, the findings were more wide ranging than we had expected, and resulted in a development plan to retain and build on what was working. I'm going to share the non-confidential learning, as it has profound implications for the future of residential care, and first want to give thanks to Abbeyfield, it is an inspiring and inspired charity.

Slide Two

In the course of the study I interviewed over 100 residents, staff and volunteers, using a semi-structured approach to explore practical, critical questions: aiming to understand how people feel about their lives, and what is happening around them that affects those feelings? Each interview took about an hour and was normally held in private.

Slide three What Matters?

What helps people to feel loved, known and valued as individuals, secure in their lives and at peace insofar as is possible for them? What really matters to staff and residents? These seem to be some of the most essential questions.

Slide Four Family

We found that it was very much about creating family. The formation of family bonds and relationships in a home can give a great sense of support and security, and hence underlies much of the spiritual health of staff and residents. It engenders respect and a way of treating people with compassion but without patronising them, and most importantly the family is a model for two-way relationships. This slide shows the factors important to creating bonds, and I'm going to look at each aspect. My comments are illustrated by quotes from interviews, because the whole exercise was really about listening to voices of others.

Slide Five Privacy and company

Much is said about loneliness of older people, but the answer is not all about corralling people into activities. Getting the balance right between ensuring company and privacy is very important to a sense of self-articulation, and hence to spiritual well-being. Helping people to stay part of their local community falls within this spectrum, and residents are happier when they do not have to uproot themselves from friends and a known environment to move into a home

Slide Six Environment

The physical environment strongly influences feelings of dignity, security and belonging. No-one wanted to be in a home that looked like a hospital or hotel, they wanted somewhere to belong to.

Good nutrition is transformative, and meals bring people together, providing a structure to life. Views from the windows of the local town or countryside help to keep a sense of community and continuity. A variety of lounges that feel like home, with books, pictures and ornaments that people have chosen themselves, and a focal point, ideally a fire and a piano, around which to gather for tea and chatting. These all nurture bonding.

Slide seven Listening

Making time for listening is vital to nurturing spiritual health - but sharing stories, like company, must be a choice and cannot be forced or hurried. The most important thing is for trust to grow, to enable listening and talking, and most staff and residents said this happened over many months. This demands time and continuity.

Slide eight Security

Older people often felt alone and vulnerable in their previous home, so safety and security are enormously important in providing a safe base from which to regain confidence. Security means both physical safety and also the security of established relationships, such that the same carers are seen and known on a daily basis.

Slide nine Transformation

When these conditions are fulfilled, people can be transformed by the right relationships in the right environment. Some of the testimonies I heard were very moving: one family said, 'We've got our Mum back again'. All the stories of transformation suggested that spiritual fulfilment had come about because a person had been facilitated to move on, and that their improved state of mind had in turn helped them to be valued by their blood relatives and new family.

Slide ten paradigm shift

If we are really to respect what the voices from the homes are saying, we need to take a transformative approach to the norms of care-giving. When we view ideas currently accepted as representing best practice through the lens of spiritual fulfilment, they can in fact undergo a paradigm shift.

Homes...families

Building a family is a development from the concept of providing a home. A family is based on bonds that grow and evolve, on interdependence and on acceptance of the good and less good characteristics of others. The influence of the environment and manager can create friendships and bonds that are supportive and help combat loneliness.

Independence.....interdependence

Independence is supposed to be a blessing, and indeed protecting an element of independence through giving choice and respecting individuality is essential in care homes. It is true that there must be freedom to express and be oneself, but independence can easily be another word for loneliness.

Human beings are defined by inter-dependence, knowing they are cared about, and have others to care for. Relationships are central to spiritual well-being, which means that the concept of independence needs to be redefined.

Freedom....meaning in life

It is often said, to remind us to slow down in our busy lives, that we are human beings, not human doings. Perhaps the same should be applied to our approach to the elderly. Freedom to move around at will, cook, clean and dress oneself is wonderful. But gradually the capability fades, and then we must redefine the concept and offer the freedom to be rather than to do.

People must know they are valued for who they are, and are enabled to contribute in ways that are still possible. 'I think it's very important that the person is still their own person', said one manager. Do old people really want to talk about the past all the time? It is essential to mental

well-being to look back at a life that has meaning, and feels well lived. But this does not mean always looking backwards, as though there were nothing to look forward to.

Tasks....Interaction

Sharing a home is not just about getting things done – the bath, the meal, the dressing. These things are essential, and yet at the same time incidental to the interaction that happens during the task. There is a danger of care-giving being broken down into tasks that can be seen as done and completed, when in fact it is a continuous process.

Care...love

Sadly, the word 'care' (like 'home') has grown to hold many negative connotations in our society. 'Care is about everyone's social and spiritual needs', as one manager said. The people I met talked about love. Love is found in all types of communication: listening, non-verbal, and particularly touch. People often spoke about the importance of hugs and hand holding, when the interaction of caring for changes into caring about. We have to stop being afraid to use the word 'love', or we will simply not have any word left to describe the very basis of relationships that are spiritually transformative.

Slide eleven implications

What we have heard about a process that I have called 'mutual chaplaincy' has a wider implication. Can we be satisfied with anything less than a real change of attitude to national policy and practice?

We all know that older people are very reluctant to move into care homes, fearing isolation from their previous life, loss of identity and freedom, high costs and at the worst indifference or even abuse. Reports such as that by Age UK, indicating that over a million old people are lonely in their own homes, and many name the TV as their 'best friend', highlight how vital it is to break down perceived barriers to moving into shared residential settings.

The factors that enable loving care are: the right environment; supported, trained and valued staff; time; good nutrition. These things cost money – but they save money further down the line, because they preserve mental and physical health.

The factors that make for elderly spiritual well-being are no different from those that make life happy and worthwhile for most of us. As one manager said: 'Elderly people want the same as everyone else: a clean warm room, good food, and just somebody there for them'.

Getting elderly care onto a more stable footing in the UK means accepting that there needs to be a shift in the way public money is invested, and a move from commercial provision towards high quality charities such that government and private spending is optimised. This could make a profound difference to society generally.

Slide twelve book

Much more can be found in the book *Developing a Relational Model of Care for Older People: Creating Environments for Shared Living* Which can be found on the Jessica Kingsley Publishers table.