

Reminiscence sessions in social preventive workshops, a group approach

El trabajo de la reminiscencia en talleres sociopreventivos, un abordaje grupal

Sessões de reminiscências em oficinas sociais preventivas, uma abordagem de grupo

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, the authors share their experience in coordinating workshops focused on reminiscence for many years. These workshops were successful in achieving good results in primary prevention in the elderly. We understand reminiscence as "an organized, complex mental activity, which has an important instrumental purpose: allowing the subject to reaffirm his/her self-esteem when his/her psychophysical and relational skills begin to lose vitality." (Salvarezza, 1988, p. 112). The main objective was aimed at socio-prevention, thus it has sought to encourage the development of affective bonds between peers, participation in new areas of relationship and community integration. Working from the positive psychology perspective, redirecting the focus of attention from weaknesses to human strengths and focusing the work on the life stories of the participants, the idea was to increase the autonomy, self-worth, self-esteem of the individual and strengthen his sense of identity.

Keywords: Reminiscence; Elderly; Prevention; Positive Psychology.

RESUMEN: *En este trabajo las autoras transmitimos la experiencia de coordinar durante varios años talleres centrados en la reminiscencia, logrando buenos resultados en prevención primaria con adultos mayores. Entendemos la reminiscencia como "una actividad mental organizada, compleja y que posee una finalidad instrumental importantísima: la de permitirle al sujeto reafirmar su autoestima cuando sus capacidades psicofísicas y relacionales comienzan a perder vitalidad". (Salvarezza, 1998, p. 112). El objetivo fundamental apuntó a la socioprevención, por tanto se ha buscado favorecer el desarrollo de vínculos entre pares, la participación en nuevos ámbitos de relación y la integración comunitaria. Trabajando desde la Psicología positiva reorientando el foco atencional de las debilidades a las fortalezas humanas. Y centrando la tarea en las narraciones de los participantes, se ha tendido a aumentar la autonomía, la valoración personal, la autoestima y a consolidar el sentido de identidad.*

Palabras clave: *Reminiscencia; Adulto Mayor; Prevención; Psicología Positiva.*

RESUMO: *Neste artigo, os autores compartilham sua experiência na coordenação de oficinas de reminiscência por muitos anos. Essas oficinas foram bem-sucedidas na obtenção de bons resultados na prevenção primária em idosos. Entendemos reminiscência como "uma atividade organizada de complexidade mental, que tem um importante propósito instrumental: permitindo um tema que reafirme a auto-estima das pessoas idosas, quando suas habilidades psicofísicas e relacionais começam a perder a vitalidade." (Salvarezza, 1988, p. 112). O objetivo principal foi voltado à prevenção social; portanto, procurando incentivar o desenvolvimento de laços afetivos entre pares, a participação em novas áreas de relacionamento e à integração da comunidade. Trabalhando a partir da perspectiva da Psicologia Positiva, redirecionando o foco de atenção de deficiências a forças humanas e focar o trabalho sobre as histórias de vida dos participantes, a ideia foi aumentar a autonomia, a auto-estima do indivíduo e fortalecer seu senso de identidade.*

Palavras-chave: *Reminiscência; Idosos; Prevenção; Psicologia Positiva.*

Introduction

Several years ago, we worked from the preventive aspect of psychology with older adults in workshops focused on reminiscence.

The results were highly positive, achieving the objectives that guided our project. At the same time, we noted that, in part, the effectiveness of many of the techniques and psychological intervention strategies developed was due to the generation of positive emotional states, or to the creation of appropriate conditions for them to appear.

Therefore, in the current educational, preventive and health-promotion workshop, we try to provide an important role to the development of positive strengths that favor the narrative processes of the participants.

This workshop promotes obtaining new skills and knowledge by assessing previous experiences and by participating in group learning. It also encourages the improvement of cognitive functions, the achievement of empowerment, the increase of autonomy and personal assessment. In addition, it favors the development of affective bonds with peers and encourages participation in new areas of social interaction and community integration, taking into account the peculiarities of each subject, and thereby increasing the well-being and the generative potential of the participants.

Rationale

The psychological basis for the layout of this workshop lies in the notion of reminiscence, which claims, redefines, strengthens and consolidates identity in the face of changes and discontinuities that may happen in the aging process. Reminiscence gives meaning to the memories and current experiences (Scolni, & Zrinovich, 2013; 2014).

Reminiscence has also been useful in group work interventions, enabling psychostimulation, mainly of language and memory functions, establishing connections between past, present and future. It also promotes sociability and, therefore, openness to interpersonal relations, confirming a sense of identity. This reinforces the feelings of self-esteem, self-worth, coherence and continuity (Gibson, 2004). In this sense, we understand reminiscence as "an organized complex mental activity, which has an important instrumental purpose: to enable the subject to reaffirm his/her self-esteem when his/her psychophysical and relational skills begin to lose vitality" (Salvarezza, 1998). In fact, reminiscence is a universal and necessary activity, which helps to review one's life and to reconstruct one's personal life story.

While the concept centered on the pathological aspect aims at correcting flaws and repairing damage, Positive Psychology insists on building personal and group competence for the promotion and prevention of health, expanding the traditional focus of research and intervention. We understand that positive psychology implies redirecting the focus of attention from the weaknesses to the inherent strengths of individuals by promoting people's ability to develop positive emotions and effective coping resources.

From the paradigm of positive psychology, which focuses on human potential, the task of remembering constitutes a subjective experience of well-being that improves the quality of life and prevents the onset of pathologies. When a person recalls, memories are seen from the present and therefore emotions that come together with this episode are captured and remembered at present time.

Reminiscing can be used in two ways. In some cases, it is used as an escape, as a return to certain event in order to fix a moment in time; in this case, it is a defense mechanism to avoid looking at reality. This form is an obsessive, pathological reminiscence because the subject deviates from reality, which leads him/her to withdrawal.

In this study, we will refer to a way of remembering that contributes to good aging. In addition, we would like to point out different functions in this form of positive reminiscence. One of them promotes integrity because it relates to what was lived, connecting the past with the present, thus becoming an experience that gives continuity to the life story. In addition, by integrating the experiences there is reconciliation with the past life story, avoiding excessive longing for what was not lived. Thus, a meaning and purpose to life is found.

Working with this type of reminiscence boosts self-esteem and reinforces identity, which is the experience of one's self, a unit that distinguishes us from others, makes us unique and enables us to recognize ourselves. Indeed, one visualizes oneself as a single being throughout life. One recognizes oneself in the child and youth that one used to be, in the adult who grew up, and now in the older person facing a new stage of life. Consequently, the individual has a new chance to build his/her understanding of the world and his/her values. The individual also has the opportunity to rethink his/her view of life and change his/her beliefs, so this reconstruction may lead, in many cases, to learning and personal growth. (Posek, 2006)

In the aging process, self-esteem is threatened because of changes and losses. At this time, the subject feels more vulnerable, sometimes lonely, so recalling facts of his life story with others helps him/her personally and socially.

Reminiscence helps to strengthen self-esteem because we remember more vivid facts, highlighting everything that was done and recognizing it as one's own. Butler points out that there is "a positive correlation between reminiscence and positive adaptation to aging thanks to the preservation of self-esteem and the consolidation of the sense of identity." (1998).

Reminiscence also stimulates the grieving process; we understand this as the coping mechanism that enables us to face significant loss (a loved one, an important object, an important activity). Bereavement comes together with a feeling of sadness and pain caused by the loss, which is a part of this process. Loss is a vital experience; the person misses someone/something significant, whether this is real or not. Freud in 1915 held that "grief is usually a reaction to the loss of a loved one or an equivalent abstraction, a country, freedom, an ideal, etc." (Freud, S. 1990). Indeed, grief leads to become intimately detached of the lost object; whereby, in a lifetime one suffers many more or less significant and painful losses. Considering grief as a mental process, it is implied that the mourning period will be different for each subject; resolution causes the release of energy, which is then available for new activities and new relationships.

During the workshop, affective bonds are achieved through new personal experiences with peers. In this sense, Jacques Laforest holds "old age is experienced in a positive way when the individual continues experiencing personal evolution as he/she did in his/her earlier stages of life" (LaForest, 1991).

In this way, the personal evolution is taken as growth, self-improvement and progression; to be and live more as opposed to produce or have more. This evidence is related to a better quality of life and to experiences focused on the subject.

Therefore, personal evolution is taken as growth, self-improvement and progression; to be and live more as opposed to produce or have more. This evidence is related to a better quality of life and to experiences focused on the subject.

Intervention objectives

Based on the premise of Positive psychology that emphasizes the building of skills and prevention (Seligman 2003), we focus on the main objective of the workshop activity with the certainty that the elderly must go from being an object of care to being an autonomous subject with identity and a life story.

Therefore, it is essential to create a pleasant reminiscence environment where they can not only share their memories, but also discuss, compare them with others and also profit from emotional and ethical aspects.

Here are the specific objectives that guided the development of the activity:

- To develop the capacity of reminiscence through appropriate incentives.
- To promote the development of debates, mediated by a group leader, urging seniors to communicate and resume the topics discussed with their family and friends.
- To debate about the different stages of life; and specifically the aging process.
- To recognize the prejudices about aging.
- To identify the positive aspects of this stage of life.
- To identify and strengthen their own resources and strengths.
- To share personal experiences.
- To promote socialization among older adults.
- To develop empowerment.
- To increase the autonomy and self-worth.

Working strategy

The workshop takes place for four months on a two-hour per week basis. The aim is to create a dynamic, participatory, dialogic and reflective environment where seniors can share past and present experiences and emotions. The idea is to boost resources and strengthen the individual in this new stage of life.

The number of participants is small to be able to pay the necessary attention, to motivate and to accompany each participant.

During the workshop, different techniques created by the coordinators are used. Through various devices, listed below, we share life stories with the participants, but only referred to the specific moments of life mentioned by them.

Life stories are working strategies that appeal to the narrative, i.e., a significant order of the events that evoke the subject's view of his world. With the intervention of the group leaders and participants of the workshop, these narratives lead to the promotion of new frameworks of meaning.

Studies conducted in people exposed to reminiscence sessions through which positive autobiographical memories are trained have found that this activity helps to reduce the tendency toward having negative memories and thus prevents harmful effects on the subject (Afonso, & Bueno, 2010). Specifically, the task proposes that participants tell their experiences or memories related to specific events in their own life story. They should bring out significant positive aspects that lead to a positive assessment of the subject, for his/her beauty, kindness, altruism or other related value.

Thus, the worldview of the times and contexts recreated in the elderly's narratives are analyzed and discussed; "those old times" from the past acquire new meaning and are linked to the present, since in many cases, older people are stuck in the past, without considering the present time as part of their prose.

In short, different Positive psychology studies have shown that experiencing positive feelings and emotions relates to global and flexible thinking styles.

Activities and Devices

Here are some activities and devices used in the workshop environment:

- Photographs, music, memorabilia, videos, newspapers, books with photographs, historic supplements, family albums.
- Reflection on emerging issues.
- Discussion about negative representations of old age, myths, negative stereotypes and prejudices.
- Film analysis.
- Talks on the proposed topics by the instructors.

Conclusions

The possibility of remembrance in the group process provides the subject with the chance of rediscovering aspects of his own past, which are recognized by and with the group, as well as the ability to repair and mourn past experiences.

Remembrance is a way of preservation and at the same time, it recognizes loss as a form of memory. There, the lifespan and the possibility to rethink its logic are at stake. It can also increase the autonomy, self-worth, self-esteem and the consolidation of one's identity.

Many authors claim that a significant psychological task of this stage is the attempt to contemplate, with consistency and acceptance life as a whole. If this succeeds, it will culminate in the integrity of the self. Also, in narrative terms, we are referring to the emergence of new meanings, perceptions of relationship between meanings that were already there, and the linking of new meanings with positive emotions. Finally, the ability to remember enables us to behave in ways that are derived from these new narratives in many areas of everyday life.

From our experience in working with different workshops, we have observed that the elderly participants have increased and strengthened their social support networks, thereby raising their self-esteem. They felt able to change their own life story by finding new meanings for some past conflicting events and being able to read these events in a different light. Finally, the workshop participants built new bonds, they reconnected with their feelings and emotions developing the ability to talk and listen to each other, making a collective construction of new knowledge. Summing up, the positive re-evaluation of aging was part of a series of personal and social changes.

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