

Meaningful Engagement

Creating Connection In Dementia Care

A practical guide for residential aged care teams



FACILITATED BY

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DELIVERED BY

E4 People
Aged Care Staffing Specialists
Committed to upskilling the aged care
sector to deliver confident,
dignified dementia care.

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DEMENTIA TRAINING WORKSHOP SERIES

Welcome

FROM THE E4 PEOPLE TEAM

Across the Dementia Training Webinar series we held across March and April 2026, we have brought together aged care professionals from across Australia to deepen the skills, language, and confidence we all need to provide dignified, person-centred dementia care.

This closing workshop - Meaningful Engagement: Creating Connection - was facilitated by Jill Schulze, an experienced lifestyle and aged care practitioner with The Dementia Centre, part of Hammond Innovations and HammondCare.

This guide captures the ideas, frameworks, and stories Jill shared, so you can return to them in your facility, share them with your team, and use them in everyday practice. It is written for personal care workers, nurses, lifestyle staff, allied health, hospitality, domestic teams, and leaders - because as Jill made clear, meaningful engagement is everyone's job.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Meaningful engagement is the act of creating purpose, connection and identity for people living with dementia.
- It is not the responsibility of lifestyle staff alone - every team member contributes.
- Life story is the most powerful tool we have to connect, settle, and engage residents.
- Done well, meaningful engagement reduces apathy, anxiety, and changed behaviours, and lifts the quality of every resident's day.

Acknowledgement of Country

E4 People and The Dementia Centre acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, work, learn, and provide care. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We acknowledge that ongoing connection to land, sea, and community is essential to the wellbeing and identity of First Nations people, and that this principle of identity and connection sits at the heart of meaningful engagement.

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CHAPTER 01

What we mean by meaningful engagement

Meaningful engagement is more than “activities.” It is the everyday work of supporting a person living with dementia to experience purpose, identity, belonging and joy.

Jill described meaningful engagement as the activities, conversations, rituals and connections that:

- Help a person retain a sense of self and identity
- Provide a sense of belonging and connection to others
- Give the person something to look forward to or to reflect back on
- Allow them to continue using their skills and abilities
- Support emotional wellbeing

“It's how we connect with other people - either our workmates or new friends, even meeting somebody on the bus and working out whether we know the same people. The practical role of life story for all of us is really vital.”

— Jill Schulze

CHAPTER 02

The two-lists exercise

To open the workshop, Jill invited every participant to picture two lists from their own life.

List one - What gives your day purpose?

The things you choose to do, the things you love, the things that make you feel like you. In the workshop these included:

- Time with family and friends
- Walking, movement and exercise
- Reading
- Creative pursuits - painting, photography, noticing the sky
- Learning new things
- Sharing a cup of tea as a ritual
- Doing work that matters to you

List two - What do you have to do to get ready for the day?

The functional, task-based things:

- Get out of bed, shower, get dressed
- Brush teeth
- Eat breakfast
- Pack a bag, prepare for work or for the day ahead

Now imagine you can only have one

if you had to choose only one list for the rest of your life - the meaningful one, or the get-ready-for-the-day one - which would you choose?

"If I was told I could only have a shower and get ready for the day and nothing else happened, I think I would lose it. I wouldn't be able to manage in life. I'd be struck with boredom and apathy and no connections."

— Jill Schulze

The point is not that we have to choose - we need both. But in residential aged care, it is easy for the second list (showering, dressing, mealtimes, medications) to crowd out the first. For a person living with dementia, who may not be able to initiate the meaningful list themselves, the absence is even more profound.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Tasks of daily living are not a substitute for meaning.
- If we only deliver the "get-ready-for-the-day" list, we deliver boredom, apathy and disconnection.
- Our job is to make sure the meaningful list happens for every resident, every day.

CHAPTER 03

Why meaningful engagement matters

Workshop participants were asked why meaningful engagement is so important for people living with dementia. Their collective answers form a strong evidence-based rationale:

- It provides structure and routine
- It supports enjoyment and emotional wellbeing
- It reaffirms that the person is a human being who matters
- It keeps people living rather than waiting
- It reduces boredom, apathy, and the changed behaviours that flow from them
- It maintains identity, dignity and self-worth

"We need to make sure that these last days are the good days. We're not just waiting - we're living, and we're continuing to live in that importance."

CHAPTER 04

Whose job is engagement?

When Jill asked workshop participants who is responsible for engagement in a care home, the answers came thick and fast: “Everyone.” “All team members.” “All stakeholders.”

This is exactly the answer the sector needs. Engagement cannot sit only with the lifestyle team, or only with the staff member on shift today. Every interaction - a hello in the corridor, a hand on the shoulder during personal care, a question over breakfast - is an opportunity for connection.

“In my past life as the lifestyle person, staff would sometimes say, ‘Oh, that’s Jill’s job.’ But everybody else’s job - domestic staff, personal care workers, nurses - was to gather information for me, so we could all support that person.”

— Jill Schulze

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Engagement is a whole-of-facility responsibility.
- Care, clinical, lifestyle, domestic, hospitality, volunteer and family teams all play a part.
- Even staff not delivering activities can contribute by gathering and sharing life story information.

CHAPTER 05

The power of life story

Life story is the single most powerful tool we have to support meaningful engagement. It tells us who the person is, what they care about, what calms them, what excites them, and how they want to be approached.

Jill referenced a range of well-known tools, including the About Me suite used by Dementia Support Australia (with an in-depth version, a culturally adapted version for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a brief version, and a snapshot). These are useful starting points, but the principles below apply regardless of the template you use.

Four questions worth asking every resident

1. What are you most proud of?
2. What does a good day include?
3. How do you want me to engage with you?
4. I feel relaxed and comfortable when...

Try answering them yourself. You will quickly see how much they reveal - and how much they would shape the way someone supported you in care.

Life story is a living document

Family members and the resident's own intake notes are a starting point, not the finished picture. Family often know only one version of a person. Friends, former colleagues, neighbours and the resident themselves will know other versions.

"My children would not know everything about me. I have six sons - they have a different understanding of their mother than a daughter, a sister, or a friend would. We are different people with different people."

— Jill Schulze

Treat life story as something the whole team adds to continuously. Every shower, every meal, every walk down the corridor is an opportunity to learn something new. When a resident shares a story while you are helping with care, write it down, hand it over, add it to their profile.

CHAPTER 06

How to gather life stories well

Start early

Don't wait four or five weeks. The sooner you understand a person, the sooner you can connect with them and the easier those first weeks become for the resident, their family, and your team.

Be interested, not interesting

"In lifestyle we sometimes go in being the entertainer. But when we're gathering information, we want to find out about them. We want to be interested rather than interesting."

— Jill Schulze

Choose your moment

Trying to gather a personal life story from someone living with dementia in a busy group setting rarely works. Find a quiet space. Begin small. Use what you learn to build into a reminiscence conversation later.

For example: if you learn a resident from England is a royalist, you have just unlocked entire conversations about the coronation, the Queen, royal weddings - and potentially a friendship with another royalist on the floor.

Share your own story

Reciprocity matters. Sharing a small piece of yourself encourages the resident to share back.

Use pictures when words don't come

When a resident cannot tell their story directly, photographs, magazines, catalogues, paintings, and the items in their room become your tools. Watch carefully. When does the person light up? When do they smile? When do they want to look at a picture again? That moment is information.

FROM THE WORKSHOP

Never let the truth get in the way of a good story

Jill reminded participants of the famous Mark Twain line - and gave it a dementia care twist. Stories told by residents may have been embellished over decades, or remembered differently from how others recall them, or be told purely for the joy of telling. None of that diminishes the value of listening.

When we correct a resident ("no, it wasn't like that"), we deflate them and shut the conversation down. When we lean in ("tell me more"), we honour both the story and the storyteller.

Sometimes part of our role is gently helping families to see the story the same way - not as a clinical sign, but as part of who their loved one has always been.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Life story is a tool every team member can help gather.
- Use the four questions - proud, good day, engage with me, relaxed when - as starters.
- Pictures, music, and items from the resident's room unlock stories when words can't.
- Listen for the joy in the story, not the accuracy of the facts.

CHAPTER 07

Designing an engagement activity

Once you know the person, you can design engagement that fits them. Jill outlined the key factors to consider:

Life story is a living document

"If you said 'Jill, we've got bingo today,' I'd be your worst nightmare - I don't like bingo. But if you said 'we've got an artist coming in to talk about watercolour,' I'd come gladly. We have to consider the person's story."

— Jill Schulze

Consider abilities, sensory needs, and cognition

- Vision and hearing - can the person see and hear what's being offered? If not, what can be adapted?
- Cognitive load - break the activity into small, manageable steps. Reduce rules and instructions.
- Adapt the game - dominoes without strict patterns, Scrabble without the board, knitting that is cast on and started for them.

FROM THE WORKSHOP

Braille bingo - turning ability into ability

A blind volunteer wanted to call bingo for residents. Jill's team built a full bingo set in braille so she could do the job she wanted to do. They then realised the set could also be used by residents who were vision-impaired. A volunteer's disability became an ability - and a new group of residents who had been excluded from a regular activity were suddenly part of it.

Always have a Plan B

Prepare two activities, not one. If the first doesn't land, you have something else ready and the person isn't sent away empty-handed.

CHAPTER 08

Kickstarting an activity

Sometimes a resident is willing, but in the moment can't quite begin - or wants to leave before they have started. Jill shared a number of practical techniques.

- Start the activity yourself and invite the person to finish it with you.
- Show, don't tell - hold up the ball, the balloon, the flowers, the photo. Let the prop do the inviting.
- Begin without too much introduction. Just get the flow going.
- Play music the person or the group is known to love.
- Ask reminiscence questions tied to the activity.
- Remind the person they are good at this. "I know you're the best scone maker — can you help me?"
- Invite individually, not just by announcement. Drop into the room and mention it casually.
- Mind the timing - catch the person before apathy and restlessness set in.
- Stay positive throughout.

FROM THE WORKSHOP

Sally, her family, and her rings

Three people had arrived at Jill's art group. One participant, Sally, sat down delighted. Then she stood up. "I need to go and tell my family where I am."

Instead of letting her leave or arguing with her reality, Jill said: "I spoke to your daughter today - she knows you're at the art group and you'll be back by lunchtime." Sally sat down again.

A few moments later, Sally noticed Jill's rings and said she needed to go back to her room to get her own. Jill responded: "We're about to paint - we don't want to get paint on your rings. Best not to wear them right now."

Sally stayed for the entire session. Without those two small acts of connection and reassurance - grounded in life story and respect - she would have left within minutes.

"We need to make sure we connect with her, and let her know there's a time period, other people know where you are, and you'll be right for lunch."

— Jill Schulze

CHAPTER 09

Different levels of participation

Not everyone in a group will participate in the same way - and that is exactly as it should be. Jill described a kind of "induction line" for an activity, with a role at every level of ability.

List one - What gives your day purpose?

Someone who can plan and complete the activity can be your co-leader - supporting set-up, helping others, and being recognised for the contribution.

Participate when set up

Some residents can fully take part if the materials are ready, the instructions are simple, and the steps are visible.

Participate in parts

Others can do some elements but need support for the rest. Know which parts so you can offer support precisely - cast on the knitting, place the first piece, pour the first cup.

Observe, comment, and share opinion

Some residents prefer to watch, comment, give an opinion, or talk through what's happening. Ask for opinions and feelings, not facts: "what do you think of this?" "how does that make you feel?" Be careful that observers do not become unintentional critics of those participating.

Talk, not do

Some people thrive in quizzes, current-affairs chat, newspaper discussions, or reminiscence conversations even when they cannot or do not want to do the activity with their hands. Anchor current-affairs talk in a time they know - mention the parties, the elections, the prime ministers of their lifetime, and the stories will flow.

Be present

Some residents engage simply by being in the room — leaning forward, listening, watching. That is engagement too.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- An activity is not one experience - it is many experiences happening at once.
- Plan roles for every level of ability before the activity begins.
- Comment, opinion and observation are full forms of participation.
- When in doubt, ask for feelings and opinions, not facts.

CHAPTER 10

Examples that work - stories from the field

Across the workshop Jill shared a number of real examples from her years in residential aged care. They demonstrate that meaningful engagement is often simple, often unglamorous, and often surprising.

FROM THE WORKSHOP

The scone competition

Tired of routine cooking activities, Jill turned them into a competition. Residents brought their own scone recipe; the group baked it, ate it, scored it, and moved on to the next person's recipe the following week.

The result was hours of reminiscing, conversation, taste-testing and laughter - and a quietly fierce debate about whose recipe really was the best.

FROM THE WORKSHOP

Esme and the Zonta birthing kits

Jill's team partnered with a local Zonta chapter to assemble birthing kits for women in low-resource countries. Each kit needed plastic sheeting, gauze, soap, cord clamps, gloves and other small items - a perfect production line.

Residents from the Memory Support Unit worked alongside cognitively intact residents. Esme's one job was to count out three pieces of gauze and place them down. She did this, happily, for hours. Together the group produced around 3,000 kits.

Esme felt the achievement deeply. The conversation around the table - children, birth, families - was meaningful to her in ways a generic craft activity could never have been.

FROM THE WORKSHOP

Bottle tops for the kindy

Jill's team collected milk and juice bottle tops from staff, families and the local community. Residents washed the bottle tops, sorted them by size and colour, and the team donated them to local kindergartens and playgroups for craft.

The residents did the meaningful manual work; children in the community benefited from the result. Purpose, contribution, reminiscence and rhythm - in a free, simple activity.

FROM THE WORKSHOP

Ten-pin bowling with a gym ball

Jill set up ten-pin bowling with proper pins for a group that included some very frail residents in princess chairs. For those who could not lift or throw a bowling ball, she placed a large gym ball on their lap. With the gentlest push of their fingers the ball would roll off, bounce down, and crash into the pins.

The gym ball was doing most of the work. But the resident was the bowler - and the raucous laughter, the cheering, and the sense of achievement were real.

FROM THE WORKSHOP

Sorting the craft cupboard

the Memory Support Unit, Jill found that one of the most engaging activities was not a craft project at all - it was sorting out the craft cupboard. Residents would empty a drawer, sort the contents, and put them back.

The cupboard didn't always end up neater. But the reminiscence, the conversation, and the sense of doing something useful were exactly what the residents needed.

"Sometimes with meaningful engagement, it's not about the end result - it's about the doing. It's about the connection."

— *Jill Schulze*

CHAPTER 11

Facilitate, don't just provide

"Providing" activities suggests a one-way delivery: the staff member as entertainer, the resident as audience. "Facilitating" engagement positions the resident as the agent of their own day, with us alongside as the supportive guide who removes barriers and creates possibilities.

This shift - from doing for, to doing with - is the heart of meaningful engagement.

"Because many people with dementia lack the cognitive skills necessary to successfully seek out engagement, it's especially important that we support the opportunities. I like to use the word facilitate — we are there to facilitate the activities, to guide them, rather than to provide them."

— Jill Schulze

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Don't deliver activities. Facilitate connection.
- Position the resident as the agent of their own day.
- Engagement is not entertainment - it is identity, purpose, and belonging.
- Small, simple, ordinary moments are often the most meaningful.

About the facilitator and the series

THE FACILITATOR

Jill Schulze

Jill is a workshop facilitator with a background in residential aged care lifestyle programs and community respite services, where meaningful engagement is a daily practice. She works as part of a national team supporting aged care providers and frontline workers to deliver person-centred dementia care.

THE TRAINING PARTNER

The Dementia Centre

Part of Hammond Innovations and HammondCare, The Dementia Centre is one of Australia's most respected providers of evidence-based dementia education and consultancy. Their work supports residential aged care providers, home care services, and individual practitioners to deliver care that respects identity, dignity, and the lived experience of people living with dementia.

THE DELIVERY PARTNER

E4 People

E4 People is an Australian healthcare staffing brand committed to upskilling the aged care sector. Our Dementia Training Workshop Series brings sector-leading expertise to residential aged care facilities across the country, equipping teams to provide confident, dignified dementia care every day.