

# Creative Conversations

## Research Summary: Enhancing communication between dementia care staff and their residents: an arts-inspired intervention

### What is 'Creative Conversations'?

Creative Conversations explored whether the arts could be used as a tool to enhance the skills of dementia care staff.

The project was a partnership between Bangor University, Dementia Positive and TenFiveTen (private companies) and Flintshire County Council Social Services.

### Why did we do this project?

Care homes are busy environments and care staff often feel a tension between getting tasks done and engaging in meaningful activities with residents.

Previous research has shown that when care staff have taken part in arts activities for people living with dementia, they often reported a deeper understanding of the people they care for, even though they were not the target of the activity.



### What did we do?

We developed and tested the 'Creative Conversations' programme\* which used a range of creative activities (poetry, film, music, art making) to help staff realise the possibilities within dementia care. It aimed to provide staff with practical communication skills to enhance caring relationships between staff and residents in their day-to-day practice.



### Who took part?

Forty four care staff from fourteen care homes in Flintshire, North Wales took part in the project. They were all female and had a considerable amount of experience of working in dementia care.



\*Creative Conversations' staff development programme is based on and takes its inspiration from two earlier programmes:

1) *The Descartes project* conceived by Hannah Zeilig, (Zeilig, Poland, Killick & Fox, 2015, *The arts in Dementia Care Education*, in *Journal of Public Mental Health* 14(1) 18-23.) Descartes innovated the use of arts based material to educate care home staff.

2) *The Arts and Older People Project* and John Killick at *The Courtyard, Hereford*. This project used poetry to enhance creative conversations and enable compassionate communication. (The Arts and Older People Project and Killick, J. (2015) *The best words, in the best order: A toolkit for making poems in dementia care settings*. The Courtyard Centre for Arts, Hereford).

“It shows you that you can use anything, doesn’t it? Any little thing. An object, a picture, and it doesn’t always have to be planned either and you can just use that. Even if it’s just for five minutes, it’s still something. It’s still an interaction, isn’t it? They [residents] might not have any interactions all afternoon apart from that.” WD01

## What are the key findings?

- Staff reported that learning through the arts helped them realise that meaningful activities could be simple and tailored to the individual resident (instead of an elaborative pre-planned group activity).
- The workshops strengthened care staff’s understanding of the importance of non-verbal communication with residents.
- Staff reported they had more confidence to try creative approaches to care.
- ‘Creative Conversations’ enhanced care staff’s understanding of residents and enriched their empathy with those they cared for.
- Staff valued the opportunity for discussion, learning from other staff and the space to reflect on their own practice within the workshops.
- ‘Creative Conversations’ provided staff with new ideas to try within the care home.
- Staff noted that some of the suggested activities had encouraged residents to interact with each other, even with those who they would not normally

## What are the implications?

- The arts can enhance the skills of dementia care staff, even those with many years of experience.
- We have shown that arts-based programmes that differ from typical ‘fact-based’ formal training may be useful for developing the skills of the dementia care workforce.
- ‘Creative Conversations’ may also have potential to support unpaid carers of people living with dementia (such as family members and friends).
- Following the success of the research project, Flintshire County Council Social Services have secured funding to offer ‘Creative Conversations’ for another year.



## Read the full publication

The full article describing ‘Creative Conversations’ is published in a peer-reviewed journal and is freely available:

Windle, G., Algar-Skaife, K., Caulfield, M., Pickering-Jones, L., Killick, J., Zeilig, H. & Tischler, V. (2019): Enhancing communication between dementia care staff and their residents: an arts-inspired intervention, *Aging & Mental Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2019.15903>