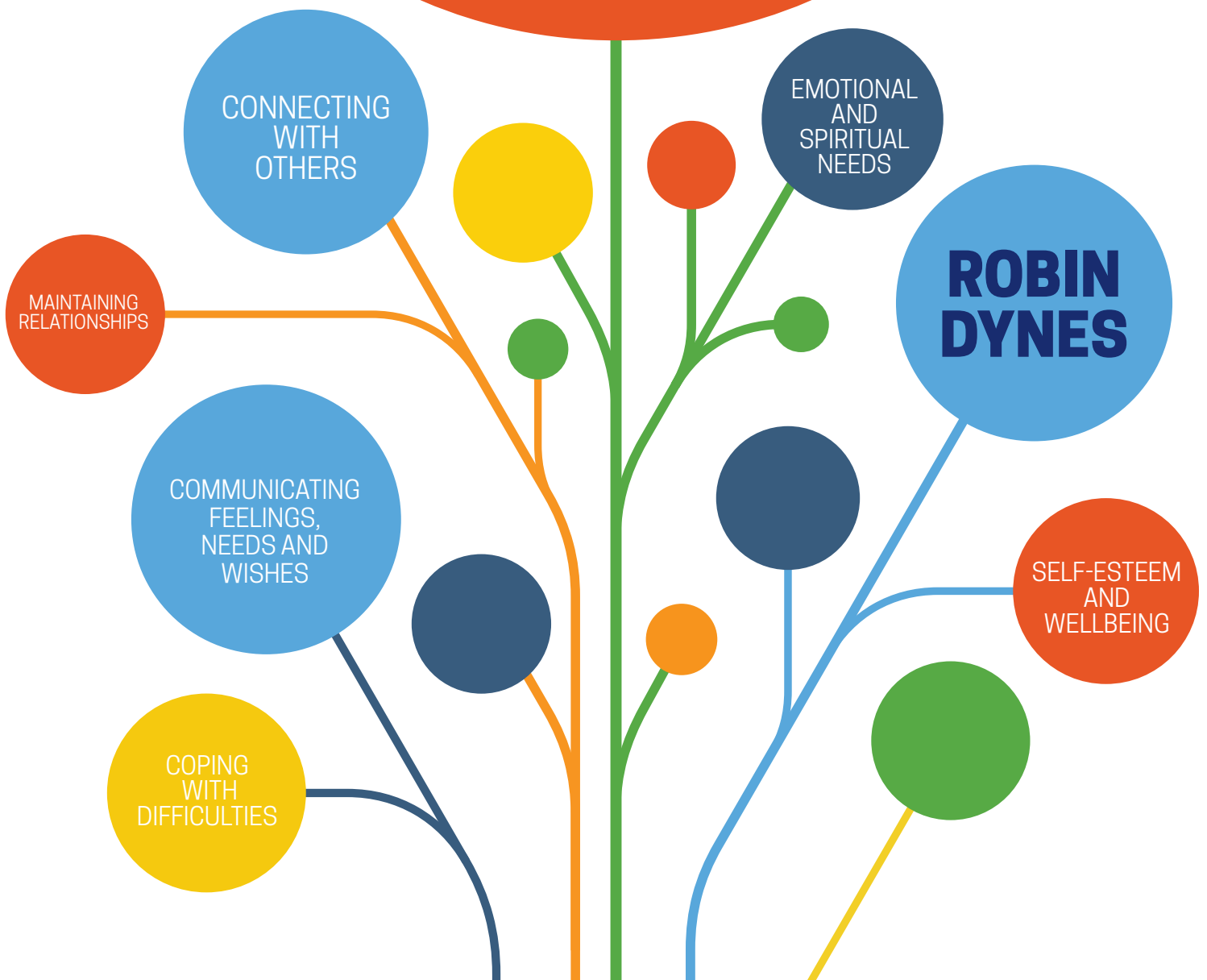


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Jessica Kingsley *Publishers*
London and Philadelphia

First published in 2017
by Jessica Kingsley Publishers
73 Collier Street
London N1 9BE, UK
and
400 Market Street, Suite 400
Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

www.jkp.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Title: Positive communication : activities to improve the wellbeing of older adults / Robin Dynes.

Description: London ; Philadelphia : Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016058444 (print) | LCCN 2017016076 (ebook) | ISBN 9781784504496 (ebook) | ISBN 9781785921810 (alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Older people--Communication. | Interpersonal communication--Problems, exercises, etc. | Nursing homes--Activity programs.

Classification: LCC BF724.85.I57 (ebook) | LCC BF724.85.I57 D96 2017 (print) | DDC 155.67/19--dc23

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78592 181 0

eISBN 978 1 78450 449 6

All resources marked with a ★ can be downloaded at www.jkp.com/voucher
using the code DYNESCOMMUNICATION

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THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go to all my friends and colleagues with whom I have been involved while facilitating groups over the past 30 or so years and who have generously shared their knowledge, games and adaptations of activities. It has been a joy to work with you all. As always, I am grateful to my wife, Barbara, for her support and for casting her editorial eye over the text of this book.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS BOOK

As people grow older, many things conspire against individuals, which influence how they communicate and relate to others. The list is long. Confidence and self-esteem may be eroded by hearing or sight loss. They are affected by illness or physical inability to get about. Family members and friends are lost through death or separation. Having to move to more suitable or manageable accommodation and changes to personal relationships destroy old communication patterns and links. They have to adapt to social and cultural changes which progress as fast as technological changes. Social expectations, shaped by peers and the events and experiences of their time, are out of tune with modern attitudes and the support services are provided by younger people with a different outlook on life.

On top of all this, a youth-orientated society often makes them feel unimportant, inadequate, isolated and obsolete. Day centres, residential homes and nursing homes designed to support them bring them into contact with others who have vastly different interests and backgrounds – ethnic, religious, social and economic. They often see staff as providers of services, not as individuals. Frequently, communication is reduced to making demands or complaining.

Older adults who maintain their communication skills and continue to interact socially maintain a more positive view about themselves and are more adept at facing these challenges. They are more able to cope with changes, communicate their feelings, express opinions and wishes and continue to contribute to society. They are more likely to maintain good physical and emotional wellbeing and maintain their sense of control and achievement in the modern world.

This book provides a range of activities to aid activity organisers help older people maintain their life skills and improve their wellbeing. This might be in residential homes, drop-in or day centres, hospices, clubs for the elderly, hospitals, nursing homes or support situations at home with carers.

USING THE ACTIVITIES

The activities are structured to make it easy to understand their purpose, the materials you will need and what to do. Some additional comments are provided to give further suggestions or tips. Although they have been divided into sections, for ease of finding an activity to suit your purpose, you will find that many would easily fit under more than one heading.

The activities vary in the length of time they will require to complete them. Some can be completed in around 10–15 minutes or so, depending on the number of people in the group and their abilities. Others will take one or more sessions. Be sure to make changes to the topics provided to include social and cultural issues and individual needs. Also, feel free to adapt activities to your personal style and group member goals.

MAKING ALLOWANCES FOR DIFFERENT ABILITIES

You will need to adjust the activities to make allowances for different mental and physical abilities. With a little thought, most of the activities can be made simpler or more challenging. Some group members may need assistance to complete the handouts because of sight impairment or physical difficulties, or they lack the ability to read or write. Even in today's enlightened age many older people and, too frequently, younger people are reluctant, or refuse, to take part in group activities because of problems with reading or writing. This can often be resolved by getting people to work in small groups or pairs – making sure anyone with difficulties is paired with a staff member or someone who is sensitive to their needs. If you know your group members well you'll be aware of what support or equipment they might need in order to feel comfortable when completing any activity.

SETTING THE TONE

Project enthusiasm, fun and enjoyment into the activities. Build a sense of trust and cohesion in the group and ensure that participants have an agreement about confidentiality regarding any personal disclosures. This will go a long way towards helping individuals to feel safe as they take part and to enter into the spirit of the activity without fear.

An enthusiastic, sincere and caring approach is infectious. If you, the group leader, enjoy the activities the magic will hopefully work for everyone.

PARTICIPANTS

It is anticipated that the activities will be used in a wide variety of settings. This means a wide range of abilities, ages, backgrounds and cultures. Some will be mixed, others not. You will need to take this into account when choosing activities and adapt them to suit.

THE FACILITATOR

Everyone develops their own style and methods for making their group successful. An activity that works well for one person with a particular group will not necessarily be successful for someone else running another group. Indeed, you may find that using the same activity with the same group on different days achieves a different response. Here are a few points to keep in mind:

- Think through what you are going to do and plan the activities.
- Choose activities which you can adapt and make suitable to the size of the group, space available and the resources and support you can provide. Take into account the needs of participants and their ability to concentrate and interact with each other. The activity or session should be challenging but not too long – adjust it accordingly.
- Plan assistance for those who need support.
- Make sure you are familiar with the activity and can explain what has to be done. Do any preparation well in advance so you don't have to keep people waiting.
- Introduce the activity in a manner which sets the tone and explains why it is being used.
- Be prepared to repeat and clarify instructions – several times if necessary – for those who have not heard or understood.
- Be liberal with praise and encouragement.
- Respect participants' rights not to share feelings, emotions and private information.
- Maintain a sense of humour. It will frequently save the day.
- At the end of the activity or session summarise what has been achieved and discuss as necessary. Show interest in whether or not people have enjoyed it or found it useful. Feedback information will be useful for when you next use the activity.

KEEPING IT SAFE

It is essential that individuals feel safe, emotionally and physically. Having some agreed group rules which include confidentiality will help. Also, caution needs to be exercised when discussing difficult topics or stimulating personal experiences. A wide variety of emotions can be triggered, ranging from sadness to happiness, anger to joy, and grief to elation. What support can you call on if anyone becomes upset or is having a bad day and needs to leave the group? If any issues surface that need professional input do you have referral routes in place? Think through your risk assessment plan for the group. Make sure you have taken emotional as well as physical safety elements into account.

Because of their special needs, does a particular participant require their own assessment? This might be due, for example, to sight impairment, panic attacks, medical conditions or behavioural difficulties. Your plan should detail action to be taken to reduce any risk – emotional or physical – to that person or other people to an acceptable level. The setting in which you are working should have a policy on these matters. Ensure you comply with it.

COPING WITH POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

Problems crop up in most groups from time to time. You may not always be able to prevent them but you will have to deal with them when they occur. Here are a few common problems, with possible solutions.

Negative and destructive remarks

Have a few basic ground rules with group members, agreeing on what is acceptable and not acceptable within the context of the group. Make sure that this includes what is acceptable behaviour.

Group members want you to provide all the answers to issues being discussed

Redirect comments or questions back to the group. Ask something like: ‘What do other group members feel about this?’ or ‘Some of you have had similar experiences – how did you deal with it?’ Alternatively, write the question or statement on a flipchart and brainstorm possible solutions with the group.

Individuals feel uncomfortable

Interacting and communicating with other people involves feelings and emotions – this opens up all sorts of possibilities. However, it remains the participant’s choice whether or not to express them. Accept what they feel they can give.

With some of the activities, issues that are uncomfortable for participants may surface. Take care not to force anyone further than they want to go. If a person shows signs of agitation or discomfort with particular issues, accept their decision on how far they want to participate. They can listen to what others have to say without contributing themselves.

Dealing with emotion

Strong emotional responses may be provoked in individuals by an activity. This may be activated by reflecting on past experiences that trigger painful memories. Different situations will need different responses. Here are a few suggestions:

- Reassure the person it is OK to show emotion in the group.
- Create a coffee break to deal with the situation or break tension.
- If necessary have a co-worker take the person out of the group for a cup of coffee or a chat. Do make sure, though, that someone comes back to reassure the other group members that everything is OK or brings the person back.
- Acknowledge with the group what has happened and discuss strategies for them to support anyone who becomes upset in the future. Ask members how they would like to be treated when they feel upset. People differ: one participant might like to be given a few minutes on their own to compose themselves; another person might like to be comforted by someone.
- Have a follow-up chat with the person after the activity. There may be an issue that requires following through by a specialist professional. A general group is not a suitable forum in which to handle extremely sensitive issues such as abuse, self-harm, thoughts of suicide or domestic violence.

When no one wants to talk

Sometimes when approaching difficult topics there can be a reluctance to talk. Everyone feels uneasy and there is an anxious atmosphere. Individuals may be reluctant to speak out. It may be that not enough trust has been developed within the group for members to handle it. If this occurs, or if the activity gets 'stuck' for any reason, try the following:

- Talk about what you think is wrong. Start by saying something like: 'I think some of you are feeling a bit uncomfortable because...' Stating the problem and talking about it often helps people to broach the subject and feel easier.
- Ask members what they think is wrong. You can do this directly to everyone. Or divide them into small groups of three or four people to discuss what is wrong and then feed back to all participants.
- Broach the topic by disclosing how you are feeling, for example: 'I feel that the activity is not going very well. Can you help me with this so we can put it right?' If you encourage people to bring the problem out into the open it can then be worked on.
- Go back to safe topics on a less personal level until more trust has been gained and people feel more comfortable.

One person dominates discussions

Thank the dominant person for their view and ask someone else to comment. Alternatively, have a ground rule that each person is given a limited time to state their views. Or, to prevent

anyone becoming dominant, you can invite participants to work in subgroups or pairs. If the behaviour persists, talk to the person away from the group. Focus on the behaviour, not the person. Say something like: 'You are making a valuable contribution to the group but you are not giving other people the opportunity to express their views.'

FINALLY

It is hoped that this book will spark your imagination for other activities to provide safe frameworks within which people can communicate positively, reveal their feelings and wishes for the future, cope with difficult situations, meet their needs, maintain their physical and spiritual wellbeing, enjoy themselves and enhance the quality of their lives. You will laugh a lot and shed some tears in the process of enabling this to happen. That is life! I wish you success in your goal.

All resources marked with a ★ can be downloaded at www.jkp.com/voucher using the code DYNESCOMMUNICATION