

Sonas aPc - a new lease of life for some

Sister Mary Threadgold outlines this innovative multi-sensory approach and aspects of good practice in its implementation

How it all began

Have you ever gone to visit an older relative in long-stay care and been saddened by the familiar sight of residents sitting in a day room doing nothing and saying nothing? Prior to 1990, I had had this experience many times and each time I was saddened by it. Some older people could not verbally communicate, but verbally they were communicating sadness and perhaps loneliness.

My professional training had been in Speech and Language Therapy and after many years of mainstream work with children I had moved to the area of learning difficulty. Here I met a challenge due to the fact that most of the residents had little or no speech. I remembered how effective music had been in some of my previous work, so I set out to devise group sessions for the purpose of developing pre-verbal skills such as interaction, motivation to communicate, listening and comprehension, expression in any form. These sessions included songs and music, taste and touch, fragrance and visual stimulation. The sessions were recorded on tape and implemented by group leaders, thereby introducing structure and repetition which met the needs of both staff and residents and at the same time activated potential for communication.

Having spent three years at a centre for young people with learning disability and through a process of lateral thinking, I began to devise similar sessions for older people in residential centers or nursing homes. Following experimentation, piloting and packaging, Sonas aPc was ready to be shared, so in October 1991, the first Sonas aPc Workshop was held in Dublin. Since then, 225 Workshops have been held in Ireland, North and South, Scotland and England, Jersey and Guernsey, Australia and the USA.

Sonas aPc is Training organisation. It is a not-for-profit Limited Company and is registered as a Charity

What does Sonas aPc actually do

Sonas aPc is a way of activating potential for communication in older people with communication difficulties using sensory stimulation, i.e. music, touch, fragrance, taste and vision. It is not an activation programme in the general sense. It is not Diversional Therapy although in some instances it can go hand-in-hand with it. The communication difficulties of the older people taking part tend to be chronic, e.g. as in dementia, chronic stroke, Parkinson's, social isolation.

The name Sonas is Gaelic and means well-being, joy or contentment; aPc stands for activating potential for communication. This approach aims to enrich the lives of older people who are being cared for in long-stay units, day centers or at home by enhancing their use of the communication which is still available to them.

An adaptation of Sonas, called Anam aPc is specifically geared to older people with learning disability and has similar aims to Sonas aPc.

What is behind the Sonas approach

Sonas aPc, as a multi-sensory approach aimed at activating potential for communication, has a theoretical base which

includes communication and the senses. Lubinski (1995) states that "Communication is a basic ingredient in successful living across the lifespan....Being able to communicate effectively is important in maintaining independence and preventing social isolation and withdrawal", but as far back as 1981 she stated that "Communication becomes the crucial difference between isolation and social connectedness, between dependence and independence and between withdrawal and fulfilment."

Leahy (1995) would seem to agree with this when she says the following: "When a person is unable to communicate adequately and effectively, the capacity for relationship is reduced, the achievement of potential inhibited and the impact on quality of life may be enormous".

Three research projects have been carried out on Sonas aPc. In 1996 Linehan and Birkbeck found that Sonas had a positive effect on verbal communication, social interaction and purposeful activity, with some carry over of benefits after the session.

In 2000, Connors was able to show significant improvements in communication, cognition, activities of daily living and depression. A follow-up research in 2001 making more extensive use of control groups found improvements in communication and cognition, although there were differences between the locations where Sonas took place.

In following the progression indicated by Maslow in his Hierarchy of needs (1954) it can be shown how Sonas aPc touches into each level above the biological needs, right up to the top level of self-actualisation (in the case of Sonas, the activation of potential for communication).

It would take a longer article to explore each of the senses in order to give substance to our belief that stimulation of the senses does in fact activate potential for communication. We concur with O'Connor and Seymour (1990) who say that, "If the loop of communication has any beginning, it starts with the senses." Returning to Lubinski (1995) we agree that, "For those with dementia, the availability of cognitive stimulation through sensory avenues...is essential."

How Sonas and Anam works in practice

Each session has a particular format which allows for some creative insertions by the leader, but which is essentially valuable in the way it allows for repetition and therefore the type of familiarity that provides security for the participants.

A group of approximately 8 older people are selected according to the criteria laid down at the Training Workshops. We recommend that the same 8 people continue to form any particular group so that quality relationships have the opportunity to develop as time goes on.

A time and place are designated for the group, as well the availability of a helper to assist the leader.

The immediate preparation is described at the Workshop so that the group session, lasting approximately 1 hour (i.e. 45 - 60 mins) will run smoothly and without undue interruption. In



the case of Anam aPc, the group sessions are either thirty minutes or fifteen minutes as appropriate.

The group (8 plus leader and helper) is gathered into a semi-circle facing the leader and as this is taking place the signature tune is playing. This often triggers the memory of their previous experience of participating in Sonas.

Then the group proper begins with a sung individual greeting, then gentle exercises with the stimulation of the sense of smell are followed by an interactive sing-along; relaxing music is next during which the senses of taste and touch are stimulated; this is followed by lively music for clapping, dance or the use of percussion; a verbal item is next and this includes proverbs and poetry and an opportunity for participants to contribute their own song, poem, proverb etc, finishing up with another sing-along, an individual sung leave-taking and the final signature tune.

We recommend that the group takes place twice a week initially, later reduced to once a week, but that it should, in most cases, be continued on a weekly basis in the long-term. If Sonas aPc is written into the care plan there will be a predictability about the weekly timetable and this means that the older people can look forward to the Sonas sessions however limited their participation may be.

The individual session lasts for 20 minutes and combines music and the sense of touch presented in a format which allows for repetition and promotes relaxation and a feeling of well-being. The individual session is not presently included in Anam, but the 15 minute sessions can be used in that way.

Positive experiences of Sonas aPc

Since the early days of Sonas aPc anecdotal evidence of the benefits of Sonas has been very positive. As a new venture in 1990, this played an important part in the continued development of the project and in making it available on an ongoing basis.

Two recent examples of positive feedback include the older lady at a residential home in Ireland who when told that the group would have to be cancelled on one particular day because one of the residents was dying reacted by saying "wouldn't you think he would have waited until tomorrow."

A second example took place in Scotland. One older gentleman spoke to the leader after the group and said "I hope I speak for the others in the group when I say that the feeling I had after the group was a feeling of overwhelming love."

In general we find that older people gain in confidence and a feeling of self-worth, they look forward to the sessions which they see as an 'occasion'; they respond non-verbally when they are not able to respond verbally; their families are helped when they see the positive effects on their loved ones; memories are triggered; the experience is generally relaxing and there can be carry-over of the benefits during the day.

Maximising the success of the approach

Sonas aPc group sessions are not equally effective with all older people. The approach is primarily for older people with dementia (including Alzheimer's) or other conditions characterised by impaired communication. In the Training Workshop, criteria are offered to the carers who will be implementing Sonas by which they select the most suitable participants for this approach.

Our 1996 research showed that training is essential in order to implement Sonas effectively. Training consists of two full days, but these are six weeks apart to allow time for those attending the Workshop to implement it a number of times in their own location. When they return to Part 2 they can feed back their positive observations as well as identifying the difficulties they have encountered.

In order to implement it effectively, carers need some personal qualities such as energy and enthusiasm. But they need most especially a sensitivity to older people and an openness to innovative approaches to the holistic care of older people with communication difficulties.

Training emphasises the need for preparation so that sessions will run smoothly. We also see preparation as a way of showing respect to the older person - they are worth the trouble we go to in order to deliver Sonas in a way that will make a difference to their quality of life.

The group participants will have their own share of additional impairments that effect vision, hearing, mobility etc. Those responsible for running the group need to know each individual and any special considerations that need to be borne in mind.

If Sonas aPc is to be implemented effectively, the most important factor of all is the good will and support of management. There are bound to be setbacks which only genuine good will can surmount. These are often associated with the allocation of time to carry out sessions, the provision of a suitable location free of interruption and an understanding of the critical features that must be respected in order to secure maximum benefits, including issues to do with group size.

Access to Training

Basic Training Workshops are available either at Sonas aPc Headquarters in Dublin or, when requested, off-site.

Workshops are held for groups of twenty-four applicants. The programme is usually from 9.15am to 5 pm on Day 1 with a slightly earlier conclusion on Day 2. This applies to both the Sonas aPc and Anam aPc Workshops.

Requests to provide Workshops are received regularly from various parts of Ireland and the U.K. Approximately 2 months notice is needed in order to complete administrative details both in Dublin and at the host site. Costs can be provided by contacting the headquarters of Sonas aPc in Dublin.

Sonas has also piloted an Advanced Training Course for those who have already completed the Basic Workshop. The emphasis in this Course is on ways in which participants can make changes for the better in their working environment using a person-centred approach in order to further activate potential for communication and thereby improve quality of life.

Tutor Training Courses are held as required in order to maintain a certain complement of available tutors both in Ireland and in the U.K. Each Workshop is presented by two Tutors.

As an accessible, credible and sustainable approach to the care of older people in long-stay or day care, Sonas aPc is available to all those responsible for quality care of older people.

References:

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