

Write letters home

Reporters

Emma Atkinson and Lisa Timms at [The Huntercombe Group](#) on 13 January 2016.

What did you doⁱ?

A number of the people we support find it difficult to talk to their relatives on the telephone or face to face, but want a meaningful relationship with them. So we support people who wish to do so to write home, enclosing photographs of activities and achievements.

What is excellent about it?

For patients in our unit, their self esteem often reflects how much they value themselves and how important they believe they are in their world. It's tied to how capable they feel. Positive self-esteem can make a big difference for adults with a learning disability. When people value themselves, they're more confident and secure about who they are, and they are better able to face and manage their learning challenges.

High self-esteem means that the person feels respected and proud, and is resilient even when they make a mistake. They have a sense of control over activities and events in their life, act independently and take responsibility for their actions. They feel comfortable and secure in forming relationships and have the courage to believe in their own values and make good decisions, even in the face of peer pressure.

Adults with learning difficulties develop positive self-esteem by experiencing repeated successes. Past accomplishments show them that they have what it takes to face new challenges. Their success makes them feel good about themselves. By writing a letter home each week develops their confidence and they want to do it again the following week. Writing a letter home is an occupation that increases self-esteem, as the patients like their family members to give praise when they see them on the activities they have engaged and participated in.

Letter writing is good for people who are living far away from their relatives, who cannot travel easily and it helps residents and staff recognise and report their successes. It forms a good focus on fun activities rather than the hard work of therapy and the structure of regular writing prevents it being forgotten. It has

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stimulated relatives to write back, strengthening the bond from both sides and encouraging them to share news and photos too. Residents are often delighted and proud to receive a letter from their relatives.

Even better next time?

Initial fears that relatives would use the opportunity to write back with distressing or hurtful comment have been unfounded. We briefed families on tone (encouraging and upbeat), but keep an eye on this. Some family news will be sad (e.g. news of the death of a relative or a relationship breakdown), but this is part of life, so we will deal with these moments as they arise.

Some residents need a plan to minimise potential harm (e.g. preoccupation with certain family members or unhealthy interest in the photos of children), but we aim to navigate these issues rather than deny their existence or deprive people of family contact.

¹ [NDTi](#) was commissioned to deliver a staff development programme promoting a more personalised and inclusive approach for those living and working in locked rehabilitation services in the English East Midlands. While the current inspection routine has a focus on risk prevention, our job is to focus on sharing positive practice and innovation. Peter Bates led the programme and wrote up these stories.

These case studies have arisen from members of the Excellence programme and NDTi has not independently verified what we have been told. Some are radical and ambitious approaches that transform the whole service, while others consist of small steps that may not seem especially exciting to other readers, but make a difference to one person. Some readers might even question whether progress is being made at all! The overall purpose is to stimulate reflection and celebration for every step forward, whether large or small.