

A Letter From Home

Using Life Story To Benefit Clients

August 2015

This month's newsletter is about the art of Life story methods for use with your home care clients. The wisdom of old age develops from the ability to elicit new meanings from prior experiences. Life story or life history is an approach in which a caregiver works with a client to review and evaluate their significant life events. Life story development has been used as a tool to enhance the care provided to older people, particularly those nearing the end of life, those with dementia, and depressed older adults. Life story is the term usually given to describe a biographical approach, which involves reviewing and evaluating an individual's past life events. Through this process, older adults find meaning and purpose in their lives through reminiscing about the past. While based on the principles of reminiscence and storytelling, it is distinct in that it also involves a critical review of life events and identifies present/future wishes. Conducting a life review with a client is an extensive process and not a one-time activity or event. It can take weeks to months or even longer and the purpose is more than just as a task-based activity. It is about integrating client memories and experiences into a self-concept that sustains or enhances their self-esteem and gives meaning to the life they have lived.

When we are young, it is important for our emotional health and growth to look forward and plan for the future. As one ages, it becomes more important to look back, talk over experiences, review and make sense of it all, and end with a feeling of satisfaction with the life lived. This is very important work and a major developmental task of older adulthood that Eric Erickson's called ego integrity versus

self-despair (see photo below). Ego integrity is achieved when the person has accepted both the triumphs and disappointments of life and is at peace and satisfied with the life lived. To achieve integrity, older adults need to believe their lives have been productive with few regrets. However, when integrity is not achieved, feelings of hopelessness and despair with a fear of death predominate. By tapping into their wisdom, older adults can recognize that they possess something to pass down to the next generation, and thus that their life has had meaning and purpose (Randers, et al, 2003). By sharing their life stories, they can look back over time and see worth and meaning and can pass this history on to others so that a part of them will always live on. Doing life story work requires good interpersonal skills so that the individual and/or family carers feel safe and supported in identifying and recalling past life events.

Stages of Psychosocial Development



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Life history information can be recorded in a range of different ways including life storybooks, leaflets, collages, memory boxes and or voice or video recording. It is important that the format chosen is one that best fits the person and their situation. A variety of templates and structures for developing life story books are available and can be bought in hard copy or developed electronically for more flexibility. They often use a combination of written information, personal narratives and pictures or images. The content generally includes significant people or events and is usually structured around a person's life milestones, such as birthplace, school days, family life, holidays and occupation. The story should be in the person's own words whenever is possible. If the person is cognitively impaired or has communication difficulties, the family may be involved in completing life story information.

The benefits of life story have been well documented over the last 20 years. Benefits can include reduction in anxiety and improvements in well-being through engagement in meaningful activity. Also, hearing about a person's life history is a powerful way of showing the person that they are valued as an individual. Life story work has also shown a better understanding of the person and improved delivery of person-centered care, improved relationships between family carers and paid caregivers in all care settings and increased verbalization and communication in older adults. Hearing the client's life story can enable caregivers to see their clients as a whole person and form a greater bond with them. This sharing with

others can allow clients to reflect and remember parts of their lives and take pride in what they have to offer others. Other benefits include an improved sense of belonging and satisfaction for family carers and people with dementia, as well as a reduction in feelings of anxiety and depression (Butler). By reflecting and sharing, the clients can hold onto memories from long ago, so others can cherish them for years to come.

To support the development of life story effectively requires training in the method and process of life story work and development of the necessary skills to facilitate its application, such as learning the art of active listening. It also requires skill in knowing how to ask open ended questions to facilitate the conversation and the process. Finally, it requires some ability to provide a supportive and therapeutic environment for the life review. Sometimes, memories are painful and may produce tears or lead to anxiety, guilt, or depression. The person performing the reminiscing must be skilled in providing support and appropriate interventions and referrals as needed. Knowledge on interacting with those with cognitive impairment are necessary and modifications must be made based on the abilities of the person.

One of the most important aspects of a successful life review interview with a client will be knowing how and what questions to ask to elicit more information. There should be no structured interview process, but the questions should be based on the client's past history and comfort level. Some suggestions for encouraging life story review may be:

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- Listen without correction or criticism.
- Start with easy, friendly questions and work your way up to more difficult or sensitive subjects.
- It's okay for there to be moments of silence or emotion. A person's life is important, and emotion is natural.
- Be patient with repetition. Sometimes people need to tell the same story often to come to terms with the experience, especially if it is very meaningful for them.
- Keep in mind that memory is not an orderly process. One memory triggers another in a way that may not seem related.
- Find a means to record the person's legacy; ie photos, video recordings
- Triggers are important when you're doing a life interview. Triggers help stimulate a memory and may include things such as photographs, keepsakes, home movies, or music.
- If you had to pick one person who had a major impact on your life, who would it be? Why?
- What do you feel have been the important successes in your life?
- What would you still like to accomplish?
- Where did you go on vacations?
- What do you remember about holiday celebrations?
- What have been some of the biggest news events in your lifetime?
- If you won a million dollars tomorrow, what would you do with the money?
- What kinds of things bring you the most pleasure now?
- What have you liked best about your life so far?
- What do you know now that you wish you'd known when you were growing up?
- What would you like your children and grandchildren to remember about you?

Asking open ended questions works for many older adults. Some examples of questions to ask that may open a dialogue for life review process are:

- What do you remember about your mother?
- Did you have a pet as a child?
- Tell me about your wedding day.
- What was your community like when you were growing up?
- Did you get an allowance growing up? What did you spend it on?

Talking about our lives is how we learn more about ourselves and the world. We live our lives forward, but we understand them backward. In helping our client's look back, we can identify turning points or dynamic events and help them clarify and organize their thinking about their life so they make sense. It is a way to help the client pass on family stories and traditions.



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Life story work is not appropriate for all clients. However, when used with clients who enjoy talking about their past and who may benefit from the socialization and the process of reflecting back on their life events; it can be a real positive intervention. The process of conducting a life review can be complex and will require additional training or education to do it effectively. For more information on Life story and life review:

Butler R, Lewis M: Aging and mental health: positive psychosocial approaches, ed 3, St. Louis, 1983, Mosby

Haight, BK & Haight, BS. The Handbook of Structured Life Review. Health Professions Press: 2007.

The Hospice Foundation of America. A guide for Recalling and Telling Your Life Story (2001)

Randers, I., Mattiasson, A.C, & Olson, TH. (2003) The social self: the 11th category of integrity. Implications of enhancing geriatric nursing care. Journal of Pplied Gerontology. 22, 289-309.

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Thompson, R. Using Life Story Work To Enhance Care. (2011) Nursing Older People; 23:8; 16-21. Retrieved at: www.nursingolderpeople.co.uk