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Senior Wellness Series

Creating an Autobiography: Starting the Process

FACT SHEET 09-02



References:

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Creating an Autobiography: Starting the Process



Where were you born? Have you ever been married or had any children? What was your career? These and many other questions can help you draw upon your lifetime memories and create an autobiography for you, your family and friends. **Creating an autobiography helps older adults write about their lives in a way that can enhance social and family networks and improve their self-esteem, important factors in maintaining physical and mental well-being.** This writing and sharing process can add meaning to seniors' lives by helping them better understand the past and present.

The life history process comprises four incremental action steps: thinking, talking, writing and sharing. This process offers a way to tell your story, both as a means of being heard and as a means of providing your family with a document of historical value. Both the process of life review and the autobiographical final product can produce great mental and emotional benefits. Now, you might be thinking:

“My life isn’t that interesting.” No one’s life is fascinating every minute or every day. But there are many things that contribute to the fabric of your life stories that are interesting. Older adults have had many interesting experiences—Depression Era, World Wars, the invention of television and witnessing the first trip to the moon.

“Who would want to read my story?” Ask yourself, “How interested would I be in reading a page, a paragraph or even a sentence that my parents or grandparents wrote about their lives?” Your children, grandchildren or nieces/ nephews would be just as fascinated by details of your life.

Get Thinking

First, get thinking about recounting your life. Consider different approaches to an autobiography, including the possible scope of the work—from one-page sketches to book-length manuscripts. You may tell your story in a variety of traditional written formats as well as in poetry, cookbooks, plays, art, photo albums and songs. There is no wrong approach—create your story in your own style!

Then think about what aspect of your life you would like to memorialize, beginning anywhere you deem important. New ideas may take shape as you read newspapers, watch television or chat with friends. Hearing others reminiscing about their lives sparks ideas in those who are listening and reminds them of incidents from their own lives.

Just remember that your story is important—to you, your family and friends!

Get Talking

Many people love to talk, so after some reflection the major challenge is to transition to writing. To help this process use this list of questions that include far-ranging topics such as:

- ▶ What were crucial turning points in your life, the decisions you made, the consequences?
- ▶ Describe an incident you remember from your school days.
- ▶ How did your family spend vacations or celebrate holidays?
- ▶ How did you meet your spouse?
- ▶ Where have you lived?
- ▶ What is special or unique about you or your family?
- ▶ What major world events influenced your daily life?
- ▶ What newspaper headline can you still see in your mind?
- ▶ Did you have a hobby or favorite pastime?
- ▶ Do you remember your first driving lesson, date or job?

Ready to Write? Start by writing about one topic, event or life situation. Remember to use dates, places, names and other specific details. Add poignant memories, insights and emotions.

Past, Present, Future

Interviews with older adult autobiography writers reveal the potential impact of an autobiography workshop that can include improved self-esteem and interesting reconnections with social networks. Many describe gaining insight on the *value* of their life within the context of their family structure. While many claimed at the start of the workshop that their lives “aren’t anything important,” most report enthusiastic reactions from family, especially grandchildren and friends to what they write.

A story from a Senior Autobiography Workshop suggests the extent to which this writing experience can have wide-ranging benefits. A participant, “Bill,” told his nephew in Chicago, who he had put through college, about his desire to write his life story after attending a workshop. In response, the nephew purchased a computer for Bill. While doing research for his autobiography, Bill reconnected with his two daughters, one of whom he hadn’t spoken to for years. Two years later, when Bill died, he left copies of his autobiography for his nephew and two daughters. One of Bill’s daughters reported that the reconnection made major changes in her life. After the funeral, his nephew spoke with the workshop instructor to offer appreciation for the impact of Bill’s autobiographical legacy on their family.



Useful Tools



- ▶ Three-ring binder notebook. Use one with a see through view pocket on the cover so you can print and insert a cover page.
- ▶ Legal sized note pad. The note pad should fit the binder and be hole punched. This will allow you to start each topic on a new page and have the ability to move pages around.
- ▶ Pen.

There are potential hazards that could undermine your creative endeavor:

CAUTION #1: Boo Birds

As you begin capturing your stories on paper, do not to be discouraged by a “boo bird” or naysayer. These are people who have something negative to say about everything. They will ask, “What would you want to do that for?” or “Who would be interested in that?” Remember, you are producing the stories of your life—primarily as an experience for yourself and secondarily as a legacy for your family.

CAUTION #2: Painful Memories

You may confront painful situations as you re-examine certain parts of your life. Remember to view the autobiography process as a chance to place events into context, with the wisdom of hindsight. The process can also help with healing unresolved issues or situations.

CAUTION #3: Perspective

Finally, do not be surprised if siblings or old friends remember things very differently from the way you do. People all view events in their own way, and sometimes these viewpoints diverge to a surprising degree. Seeing events through the eyes of others who went through the same experiences can be very interesting and enlightening and should not be cause for alarm.

The journey of compiling an autobiography can place your life into a new perspective and help you to understand how your own personal identity has been shaped by your experiences.

When you have completed the *Creating an Autobiography: Starting the Process*, move on to *Creating an Autobiography: A Family Keepsake*.