

Autobiography Workshop:
Personal Narrative as a Wellness Tool for the Elderly
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Abstract: With the growth of the aging population, Extension is trying to provide meaningful educational programming for seniors. The University of Nevada, Cooperative Extension created the Senior Autobiography Workshop to help older adults write about their lives in a way that can enhance social and family networks and improve seniors' self-esteem, important factors in maintaining physical and mental well-being. Both the process of life review and the autobiographical final product can produce great mental and emotional benefits. Workshop attendees report having gained insight on the value of their life within the context of their family structure.

Introduction

This interactive educational program helps older adults create an autobiographical record of their lives with historical value for them and their families. Sharing their life stories and collaborating with peers in the workshop can enhance their sense of social connection. This writing and sharing process can add meaning to seniors' lives by helping them better understand the past and present (Birren & Cochran, 2001).

Program Design and Delivery

The theoretical basis of the program derives from the body of literature identifying the importance of personal narratives to improve memory and promote self-esteem that can lead to extended independence and more successful aging. This workshop utilizes the social network theoretical model (Heaney & Israel, 1997).

The workshop is offered in collaboration with public and private organizations that provide services for the elderly population, primarily at senior centers and older adult housing. While there is a lot of interest in autobiography-related activities, few of these organizations have staff who feel qualified to conduct life history programs. Extension personnel can either conduct the workshop, or they can provide train-the-trainer instruction for staff or volunteers who provide services to the older adult community. Because Extension is the outreach arm of

the university, the workshop gives legitimacy to a project that seems formal and academic but is actually informal and personal.

The program appeals to seniors from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and from varying educational and income levels. As with other Extension wellness programs for older adults, participants tend to be lifelong learners who constantly try new experiences. They are recruited primarily through newsletters or flyers posted in senior centers and older adult housing complexes.

Instructor training basically involves providing an outline for the creative and interactive process, such as outlined here. Taught in a minimum of two sessions, the workshop comprises four incremental action steps: to get seniors thinking, talking, writing, and sharing details of their lives.

First, to get workshop attendees thinking about recounting their lives, the instructor describes different approaches to autobiography and the varied ranges of scope from a single page to book-length manuscripts. Program attendees have told their stories in a variety of traditional written formats as well as in poetry, cookbooks, plays, art, photo albums, and songs. Often someone in the class will question the value of their own life story. In response, the instructor asks them, "How interested would you be to read one paragraph or 100 pages that your parents or grandparents wrote about their lives?"

The next step is to get them talking by asking individualized questions. The process of peer-education usually takes over as they hear others begin reminiscing; this reminds them of incidents from their own lives.

The instructor explains there is no wrong approach and offers suggestions on how to create the document in their own style. Participants are given a three-ring, loose-leaf binder, paper, and pens so that they can start jotting notes throughout the session. It is suggested that they start each topic on a separate page in the loose-leaf binder, making it easier to move ideas around as the work progresses.

Most older adults love to talk; the major challenge is to transition them to writing. At the end of the first session, the assignment for the next class is to write about one topic, event, or life situation. Over the week-long-period, new ideas begin to take shape as they read newspapers, watch television or chat with friends. To help this process, workshop attendees are provided with a written list of questions that include far ranging topics such as:

Q. What were crucial turning points in your life, the decisions you made, the consequences?

Q. Describe an incident you remember from your school days,

Q. How did your family spend vacations or celebrate holidays?

At the second class, the focus is to get them to share their stories by having them read what they've written to the group. They hear what others have created and that all the stories are interesting, and they see the amazing variety of formats. Workshop attendees also begin to realize the value of what they've composed by the praise from their peers.

Workshop attendees are cautioned not to be discouraged by negative people who might undermine their project. It is important for these creative older adults to realize that they are producing this story of their life, primarily as an experience for themselves, secondarily as a legacy for their family. The journey of compiling an autobiography can place their life into new perspective to help them understand how their own personal identity has been shaped by their lives (Birren & Cochran 2001).

Accomplishments and Impacts

Qualitative interviews with workshop attendees reveal the impact of the program, which often includes 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 workshops that their lives "aren't anything important," most report enthusiastic reactions from family, especially grandchildren, and friends to what they write. They also see how they fit, what they contribute, in a process that one participant compared to the holiday classic movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

In April 1999, a group of 15 active older adults at a Las Vegas senior apartment complex participated in two sessions with the Extension instructor. Nine of them decided to continue meeting weekly. Seven months later, each participant had a printed book including pictures, bound with covers, to give their family members as a unique Christmas gift.

The professional quality of their life documents was matched with their stories of reuniting with family members. Bridges were rebuilt as they called, wrote, and visited friends and relatives to obtain pictures and memorabilia or to check facts.

Many had not been in contact with these people for decades. One said, " I never thought I could have this much fun." Most of the statements about the impact of the workshop on their lives reflected improved self-esteem and/or reconnections with social networks, program goals directly related to the theoretical model.

References

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