

HEAL

Health Education for Assisted Living

Lesson : **Autobiography, Part 1**

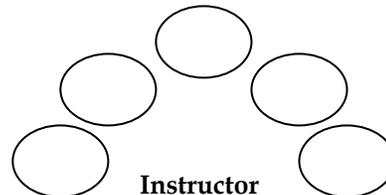
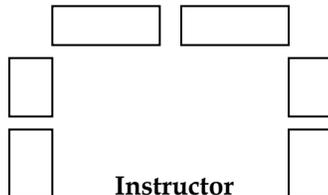
This lesson is designed to help students begin thinking about their lives and the possibility of documenting memories of their experiences.

Learning Tools

- Paper and pen so that participants can take notes during the class.
- Notebook: three-ring loose leaf binder (see p. 4).

Learning Setting

The classroom must be set up to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers with a table where each person can write and take notes. A rectangular shape with one of the narrow ends open allows the instructor to be in the middle and visible to every student. All participants can see and hear each other in this setting. This also discourages distracting side-conversations.



Also see "Facilitating the Learning Experience, page 3.

Activity

- Instructor training basically involves providing an outline for the creative and interactive process, such as detailed here.
- Taught in a minimum of two lessons, the life history process comprises four incremental action steps: to get seniors thinking and talking (Lesson 1), then writing and sharing details of their lives (Lesson 2).

Why is this important?

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.

Key Points

- Writing a life story can have historical value for older adults and their families.
- Assisted living residents have moved to a new "neighborhood." Shared memories of their lives help them get to know their new neighbors.

Introduction

These interactive educational lessons help 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 classes can enhance their sense of social connection and improve their self-esteem, two 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. (Birren & Cochran, 2001, pp 4-5) Both the process of life review and the autobiographical final product can produce great mental and emotional benefits. Previous workshop attendees report having gained insight on the *value* of their lives.

Assisted living is a new environment to many of these seniors. It is helpful in the instruction process to explain that this living situation represents a move to a new neighborhood and the autobiography process is part of meeting new neighbors and friends. When older adults move away from the communities where they have lived most of their lives and take up a new home in retirement, they leave behind established social networks of family, friends and coworkers. This is especially true in the life-changing move to assisted living. Research documents that strong social networks are vital to the physical and mental well-being of elders. These lessons can enhance social and family networks for elders residing in an assisted living facility.

The two Autobiography classes are interactive education designed to bring elders together to help them create an autobiographical record of their lives. This process offers participants a way to tell their stories, both as a means of being heard and providing their families with a document of historical value. Involvement in the classes, both in the writing process and in the act of sharing life stories, can lead to broader forms of social connectedness for elders. These two lessons comprise incremental action steps to get seniors thinking, talking and writing and then, to encourage them to share details of their lives with others.

Program Design and Delivery

The theoretical basis of these sessions 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).

While there is a lot of interest in autobiography-related activities, few assisted living organizations have staff that feel qualified to conduct life history programs. The workshop can be conducted either by Extension personnel or they can provide train-the-trainer instruction for staff or volunteers who provide services to the assisted living residents. Autobiography writing may seem formal and academic but is actually informal and personal.

Program Design and Delivery-continued

The program appeals to seniors from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and from varying educational and income levels. As with other wellness programs for older adults, participants tend to be lifelong learners who constantly try new experiences.

Teaching Technique - Be Creative

The instructor explains there is no wrong approach and offers suggestions on how to create the document in their own style. This can include, but is not limited to, a variety of written formats from one paragraph to a book length manuscript. Others tell their stories in poetry, songs, cookbooks, plays, artwork and photo albums.

Discussion

This section begins the lesson instruction. Begin by using the key points and emphasizing this is a fun process. To assist with lesson delivery, follow the outline below and always encourage participation from the group. Questions, examples, etc. are important parts of this life story process.

Decision-making: This lesson allows participants to see the role decision-making had played in their lives. Emphasis is placed on the decisions that they made were the “best they could do” within the context of the information they had at the time. As the instructor, transfer that to present decision-making, especially in their current daily decision-making to fully participate in the lesson/program and get the most out of this experience, or choose a more negative approach. It is important to note that by making the decision to attend these HEAL classes, they are choosing to actively continue to learn and positively interact with their peer “neighbors.”

Taught in a minimum of two sessions, this process comprises four incremental action steps: to get seniors thinking, talking, writing and sharing details of their lives.

1. Get The Seniors Thinking

First, to get students **thinking** about recounting their lives, the instructor describes different approaches to autobiography, including the possible scope of the work – from one-page sketches 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. Many have to be convinced that their story is important to family members.

In the classroom...

One autobiography student was known in her family as a fantastic cook. Her food played a role in many important family events. So, she wrote her autobiography as a cookbook. Each recipe included information on where she got the recipe (how and who from), when she first prepared it, with a description of the event (Christmas, wedding, birthday), and finally, what it meant to the family. She also added details of people's reaction (Uncle Harry did not usually eat vegetables but he had three servings of this).

2. Get The Older Adults Talking

The next step in the life story process is asking individualized questions to encourage the elders to **talk** about themselves. To stimulate participants' thought processes, the instructor asks students what aspect of their lives they would like to memorialize, explaining that they can begin anywhere they deem important. Peer education usually takes over the class at this point. Hearing others reminiscing about their lives sparks ideas in those who are listening and reminds them of incidents from their own lives.

The instructor explains that there is no wrong approach and multiple suitable formats limited only by their imagination (see above). Offer suggestions on how to create the document in their own style. Participants are given a three-ring binder notebook and 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.

3. Get Students Writing

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 will begin to take shape as they read newspapers, watch television or chat with friends.

To help this process, students are provided with a written 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?

There is always at least one person in each session who will say, "my life isn't that interesting." Usually, it helps to explain that no one's life is fascinating every minute or every day. But there are many things that contribute to the fabric of their life stories that are interesting.

Ask the class how interested they would be in reading a page, a paragraph or even a sentence that their parents or grandparents wrote about their lives. Most respond, “oh that would be great.” Explain to them that their children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews would be just as fascinated by details of their lives.

Older adults who attend these sessions are survivors. They have had many interesting experiences. They survived the Depression, World Wars and the invention of television. Get them talking about the magic of radio programs they listened to. Or the music that has been the soundtrack of their lives.

This ends the lesson discussion.

In the classroom...

**This life story was written by a participant in the HEAL program.
She uses humor to reminisce about how she met her husband.**

What a Woman

At 21, out of school, the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City and on my way to Florida with mom and dad. I wasn't going to be an actress or movie star but the two years had been a learning experience and fun. I learned to face the public, speak loud enough to be heard in the 20th row and to walk head up, back straight and to look relaxed. My grandmother paid for the two years but she wanted me to be a ballerina. Me at 5'8" and 145 pounds. I didn't think so.

Palm Beach in '44 & '45 was rather quiet and my father got us a great two-bedroom apartment three houses from the ocean. Sand on the doorstep was not unusual. Strolling along the ocean and looking at the million dollar homes was breathtaking. I imagined living in one would be just wonderful but I was told not many were occupied, the owners were off in far away places. I walked back to mom and dad's beach blanket and found a stranger lying with them. Bathing trunks, good build, black or dark brown curly hair and not too bad looking. Dad introduced him and that was all the talk. No room was made for me on the blanket so I slowly walked away.

For the next two weeks this fellow named Don, dated my mom and dad. Bike rides, bowling, museums, movies, lunches at special places and several morning breakfasts that mom made for "Don." I caught glimpses but not often. Then out of the blue a floral box with two large gardenias and a note arrived "I would like a date tonight at 7:00 p.m." The start of a beautiful romance. He knew all about me and we married in the gardens of the famous Breakers Hotel three months later, March 25, 1945.

A few words of caution are important as seniors embark on the life history experience:

CAUTION #1: Boo Birds

The instructor should point out to participants the potential hazards that could undermine their creative endeavor.

As the elders begin capturing their stories on paper, they are warned not to be discouraged by a “boo bird” or naysayer -- the 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?” The instructor reminds attendees they are producing the stories 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 a new perspective to help them understand how their own personal identity has been shaped by their experiences.

CAUTION #2: Painful Memories

The instructor also cautions the elders that they may confront painful situations as they re-examine certain parts of their lives.

They are coached to view the autobiography process as a chance to place events into context, with the wisdom of hindsight, and to begin healing unresolved issues or situations.

CAUTION #3: Perspective

Finally, the instructor warns participants not to be surprised if siblings or old friends remember things *very* differently from the way they do. People view events in their own way, and sometimes these viewpoints diverge to a surprising degree.

In each class at least one student will ask about a brother or sister, “What family were they raised in?” or “Where were they when this happened?” The instructor assures participants that 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.

Accomplishments and Impacts

Qualitative interviews with autobiography participants reveal the potential impact of the program that 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.”

A story from a Senior Autobiography Workshop presented a few years ago suggests the extent to which such programs can have wide-ranging benefits. A participant we’ll call Bill told his nephew, who he had put through college, in Chicago about the workshop and his desire to write his life story. 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 called the Las Vegas senior center director to thank her for the impact of Bill’s autobiographical legacy on their family. Clearly, this autobiography process – which could be easily replicated in any community especially assisted living – is having a positive impact on the quality of life for elders and their families.

Educational Giveaways-Optional

- Three-ring binder notebook, with a see-through view pocket on the cover, so you can print and insert a cover page (for an example of a cover page, see next lesson).
- Legal sized note pad (to fit the binder), hole punched. This allows the students to start each topic on a new page and have the ability to move things around.
- Pen.

It is strongly 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.

Participants should now be able to begin thinking about their lives and the possibility of writing memories of their experiences.

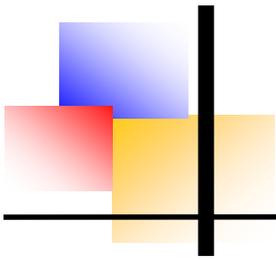
Encourage them to build upon the sharing of stories in the class. Give them a “homework” assignment for the next session.

References

Birren, J., & Cochran, K. (2001). *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Haight, B.K., Michel, Y. & Hendrix, S. (2000). *The Extended Effects of Life Review in Nursing Home Residents*. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 50 (2) pp 151-168.

Heaney, C.A. & Israel, B.A. (1997). *Social networks and social support*. Glanz, K. Lewis, F.M. & Rimer, B.K. (eds) *Health Behavior and Health Education* (pp. 179-205). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



HEAL

Health Education for Assisted Living

Lesson : **Autobiography, Part 2**

This lesson is designed to help students to read out loud the first stories they have written about their lives. Sharing these memories of their experiences with their peers is an important and rewarding part of the autobiography process.

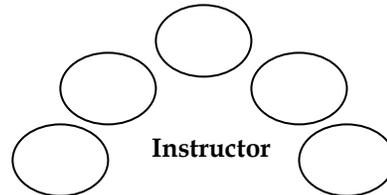
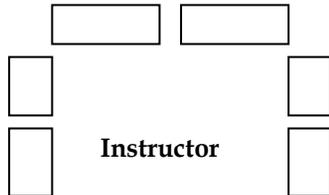
Why is this important?
This writing and sharing process can add meaning to seniors' lives by helping them better understand the past and present.

Learning Tools

- Three-ring loose leaf binder.
- Paper/pen so that participants can take notes during the class.

Learning Setting

The classroom must be set up to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers with a table where each person can take notes and jot down ideas as they occur. A rectangular shape with one of the narrow ends open allows the instructor to be in the middle and be visible to every student. Also, all participants can see and hear each other in this setting and this discourages distracting side-conversations.



Also see "Facilitating the Learning Experience, page 3.

Activity

- Basically, the instructor provides an outline for the creative and interactive process, such as outlined here.
- It is essential for the first student who reads a story to be praised and realize that others find this interesting. Once the seniors begin sharing stories and gain confidence, these classes take on a life of their own.

Key Points

- Talking about their lives helps seniors realize exactly how much they have experienced.
- Sharing with the group, and being praised for what they have written about their experiences helps validate the importance of their lives. They also make new connections with peers - their assisted living neighbors.

Activity-cont'd

- Taught in a minimum of two lessons, the activity comprises four incremental action steps: to get seniors thinking and talking (Lesson 1), then writing and sharing details of their lives (Lesson 2).

Introduction

Assisted Living is a new environment to many of these students. It helps to explain that this residence choice is comparable to a move to a new neighborhood. And the autobiography process is part of meeting new neighbors and friends, comparable to telling stories to new neighbors over a cup of coffee at the kitchen table.

Discussion

This section begins the lesson instruction. Begin by using the key points and emphasizing that this is a fun process. To assist with lesson delivery, follow the outline below and always encourage participation from the group. Questions, examples, etc. are important parts of this life story process.

At the second autobiography class the focus is to get participants to **share** their stories by having them read something they've written to the group. They hear what others have created, 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.

These older adults need to be reminded about how important their lives are to their relatives. Tell them to never throw away anything they write for this. Sometimes the only way to get that point across is to use the following example:

- In one class a student announced that she had written five pages and then cut it down to half a page so the class wouldn't have to listen to a long reading. The instructor asked her, and the class, "If your parents or grandparents wrote something about their lives, would you want to read the five-page or the half-page version?"

The student then promised the instructor and the class that she would retrieve the discarded five pages from her waste basket.

They are asked to **discard nothing**. Just tear out the sheets and put them in the back of the notebook so that they can go back later for these treasures.

Also, many participants may think their lives are unimportant. It helps to equate it to them as readers of their parents life stories. Wouldn't they have been interested? Just like they too need to realize how important they are to their family. What may be discovered is that many life experiences or situations are shared.

Decision-making: This lesson allows participants to see the role decision-making had played in their lives. Emphasis is placed on the decisions that they made were the “best they could do” within the context of the information they had at the time. As the instructor, transfer that to present decision-making, especially in their current daily decision-making to fully participate in the lesson/program and get the most out of this experience, or choose a more negative approach. It is important to note that by making the decision to attend these HEAL classes, they are choosing to actively continue to learn and positively interact with their peer “neighbors.”

In the classroom....

One woman who had grown up in the Depression wrote, “there were **not** lots of hugs and I love you.” The instructor explained that in those times providing for a family, housing, clothing and education made some parents less likely to express emotions. Obviously the woman had been hurt by this lack of outward affection. With the explanation, she began to see it in a new light and hopefully heal some very old emotional wounds.

Sharing Ideas

- As the students read their stories, it helps to **ask further questions**. Draw out more details so that the word pictures they present are even more clear. Encourage them to remember feelings, smells, tastes and other descriptive details that make the story come alive.
- Some will be able to find treasured photos which can be copied. As they get caught up in the fun process, with a little help, some students will produce quality final products that can become family heirlooms.
- If possible, get copies of their short stories printed on special paper so that the students can use them as Christmas presents to insert in cards.
- Offer to input into a computer the stories read by the first volunteers. NEVER, take the original. Make a copy at the assisted living facility, immediately return the original and input from the copy.
- Assisted living residents love hearing each other’s stories. It builds camaraderie. Whether they just moved in or have lived there for years, this enhances their feelings of connectedness.

This ends the lesson discussion.

In the classroom...

The following life stories were written by a participant in the HEAL program.

Scary Movies

On Saturdays growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, four of us girls did our housework and my father would give us each a dime for the matinee at the movie. I was about nine then. My two older sisters were supposed to take care of us two younger ones.

Usually we saw a serial like *Perils of Pauline* with Evelyn Knapp. On the last one (twelve in all) they showed the movie Frankenstein. I did not like scary movies and on the way home, in the dark, we would take a short cut home through some apartment buildings. My sister would say “watch out Frankenstein’s monster followed us home!”

I can tell you, it took me many years past my teens to stop looking behind me to see if the monster was following me. To this day I will not look at scary movies.

The Land of Enchantment

A group of six people decided to explore the Catwalk Canyon in New Mexico. As we started to walk up the canyon some people coming down noticed I had no cane to help me. They said, “no way will you be able to climb without one.”

All of us decided to search the creek area and see if there was some kind of stick around. None. After a half an hour of looking one of the guys said “we’ve wasted enough time; we need to go before dark.” Everyone started up, we noticed that we alone, no one else, was going up. Well, I said “Jesus I need help” and as I started to walk I stumbled over something. I looked down and there was a beautiful cane. I guess some little forest gnome left it for me.

The Catwalk was fabulous – Just hanging on the wall over the creek part of the way, going down ladders, crossing the creek and ending up at the top. You could almost hear moccasin steps of Indians as they walked around for it was told the Apache Indians hid in this canyon. As we came down over the bridge we started talking about how important it was to have something to lean on for balance. The rest of the group did not believe I found the cane but my husband said I found it. They thought one of the people who had left us before gave it to me.

It was my mystical cane and I have kept it ever since. My husband sanded it and put acrylic on it and made it look better.

Teaching Technique # 1 - Make it Personal

A wonderful way to encourage greater participation is to provide a cover page for the notebooks of students who read their stories aloud in the class. With a digital camera you can take a photo of them, let them come up with a title and then duplicate this on a color copier. Once you do this everyone will want to participate!!! The cover page below was designed in Publisher but any program would work well for this simple project.

What a Woman



(Participant Name)

HEAL Program at (Facility Name)

February 2007

Teaching Technique # 2 - Details, Details, Details

As they begin sharing their stories:

1. Point out how interesting the things are that they describe (comments from classmates will reinforce this).
2. Offer suggestions on how their story can be expanded.

Example:

"After years of bombing, I moved to work at a military base and met my husband. It was a better home for my 3-year-old son."

Questions:

- Bombing? War? (WWII) Where? (Europe)
- What work did she find? (Translator) How did she learn English?
- What was life like as a local civilian on a military base?
- How did she meet her husband?
- The 3-year-old son-what was that like to be single mother in war?
- How did she end up in the U.S.?

Teaching Technique # 3 - Keep It Going

As the HEAL program continues, follow-up with participants at each class asking about their life story progress or encourage them to begin or continue the writing process. Offer to write a short story, either before or after class, for participants who need assistance. Don't forget to continue to share these stories in class!

Also, autobiography or life history classes can be held weekly for months. Example:

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. They went to Kinko's together to copy old photos and create covers.

Seven months later, each participant had a printed book including pictures, bound with beautiful 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, 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.

Educational Giveaways-Optional

- Three-ring binder notebook with see through view pocket on the cover.

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.

- Notebook personalized cover.

A wonderful way to encourage greater participation is to provide a cover page for the notebooks of those who read their stories aloud in the class (see example on previous page).

Participants should have had an opportunity to read the first stories they have written about their lives as well as share with their peers these memories of their experiences.

Encourage participants to continue to write, even consider additional lessons on autobiography writing to follow up on their progress.

References

Birren, J., & Cochran, K. (2001). *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups*, Baltimore, Maryland the Johns Hopkins University Press.

Haight, B.K., Michel, Y. & Hendrix, S. (2000). "The Extended Effects of Life Review in Nursing Home Residents." *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 50(2) pp 151-168.

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