

Reminiscence: Impacting Brain Fitness, Lifelong Learning, Healthy Aging & Wellness

ABSTRACT:

This white paper will summarize the large body of research documenting the effects of reminiscence in the lives of older adults. Experts share that recalling and sharing life stories has the power to lower depression, exercise the brain, and engage those with dementia. Life stories are also creating new conversations and bonds between families, staff, volunteers, students while leading to a higher sense of purpose and meaning for elders.

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The Power of Reminiscence

For thousands of years, people from diverse cultures around the world have passed on their traditions, beliefs, and advice through the telling of stories. These stories have....

- explained lessons of life
- how to survive in difficult circumstances
- why things have happened the way they have
- and offered tales of great adventure, tragedy, or love.

In addition to the wisdom passed down, we now know that reminiscence and life review is a proven way for older adults to gain self worth, learn more about themselves, and give the gift of their stories to the next generation. Recalling life stories should be encouraged at any juncture in one's life, but primarily as people reach end of life.

There are a number of studies that have shown that reminiscence and life review affects people's lives in extraordinary ways that stimulate the brain, promote lifelong learning, and lead to healthy aging.

Brain Fitness & Lifelong Learning

Our life experiences impact the brain as we age. Every person is completely unique—with different people, events, and learning that shapes who we are. The wisdom and experience gained helps our brains prepare for the future. Engaging our brains in learning throughout our lives can help people age in a positive way. New research shows how the brain continues to adapt and gain neurons through the years if the brain is challenged.

"We can make the brain work better simply by accumulating more knowledge, which builds more networks of connections in the brain. The wisdom that we acquire can compensate for the decline that may be gradually occurring," says James McGaugh, PhD, a Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives member at University of California, Irvine.

Learning strengthens the brain as weightlifting strengthens the body. Focusing on learning can lead to positive aging experiences.

Top 5 Reasons People Reminiscence

1. Teach/Inform
2. Conversation
3. Boredom Reduction
4. Death Preparation
5. Identity

Source: Reminiscence Function Scale, Dr. Jeffrey Webster



It's time to tell your story

Healthy Aging, Wellness & Reminiscence

Human interaction matters in promoting positive brain health. "There's a lot of evidence that other people are the most unpredictable things you can encounter. So activities that have you engaging with other human beings are a fantastic form of brain exercise." said Lawrence Katz, Neurobiologist and Investigator at Duke University Medical Center.

Opportunities to reminisce together and learn about one another's lives in autobiography classes show positive outcomes in community settings. People have a chance to move beyond everyday, typical conversations such as weather, health, sports, and food. Now conversations about grandparents, neighborhood, school experiences, and personal values and beliefs are more commonplace. Reminiscence opens a door to new discovery.

Genetics plays an important role in successful, active aging and wellness, but the choices people make every day are critical too. Cognitive stimulation matters, but the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives also noted that physical exercise, diet, social connections, how we manage stress, and seeing the self and the world in a positive way are also important too.

What the experts say....

- **Dr. Robert Butler**, author of Why Survive? Being Old in America, coined the term "life review" fifty years ago. Before that time, researchers and physicians saw reminiscence as just a stepping stone toward senility and dementia. He disagreed with this belief and proposed that, as people age, reminiscence and life review were a normal part of healthy aging. Now large bodies of research show the positive outcomes from reminiscence and life review.
- **Dr. Gene Cohen**, author of The Mature Mind, sees reminiscence as a critical brain activity and he recently remarked, "Autobiography for older adults is like chocolate for the brain." Cohen cites a 2003 study by Eleanor Maguire and Christopher Frith that performed brain scans on people in their 70s and in their 30s while they were reminiscing. They found that the entire hippocampus is "lit up" and actively engaged in older adults, while 30 year olds only utilize one small part of the left hippocampal region.
- **Dr. Andrew Weil**, author of Healthy Aging, encourages older adults to keep a record of wisdom, values, and life lessons in an ethical will, or heartfelt letter to loved ones. He writes, "An ordinary will ... concerns the disposition of one's material possessions at death. An ethical will has to do with nonmaterial gifts: the values and life lessons that you wish to leave to others...At critical points in your life, take your ethical will and read it over. Add to it. Revise it and share it with people you care about. An ethical will helps you organize your own experience and focus on who you are. It's a spiritual inventory about what you want to pass on to others." Life stories can lead to a letter from the heart.

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*--Dr. Lawrence Katz,
neurobiologist*



It's time to tell your story

Skilled Nursing Care, Memory Care & Reminiscence

Studies have shown that communities see remarkable results when reminiscence and life review is encouraged.

Increases Life Satisfaction

With female nursing home residents, a study randomly assigned participants to a reminiscence group, current events discussion, or no treatment group. The results showed significant increases in life satisfaction in the reminiscence group.

Improves Resident/Staff Relations

Nursing home residents were interviewed with and without staff present and in either a reminiscence/life review format or a format more focused on the present time. The attitudes of residents toward staff improved with reminiscence and with the staff's presence at interview.

Reduces Geriatric Depression

Newly relocated nursing home residents underwent a study to examine if life review could prevent clinical depression. Significant positive results were shown in reducing depression at the short-term testing stage with an additional decrease in depression and hopelessness at one year.

Decreases Disorientation, Improves Social Interaction

A study demonstrated it is possible for older people with dementia to reminisce and that this is meaningful for them in particular, because of the losses associated with dementia. Another related case study used life review with groups of people with Alzheimer's disease. They were assigned to groups with some participating in life reviews and others did not. Results showed significance for life review groups in decreased disorientation and improvement in social interaction.

Increases Orientation, Competence After Relocation

A case study examined the use of a life review program with newly-relocated nursing home residents and it was found to decrease depression, while increasing orientation, perceived competence, and social interaction.

Increases Sense of Purpose and Meaning

After group therapy with older adults in long-term care setting over an 8-week period, this study found that the two treatment groups were significantly different from control group showing increased sense of purpose and meaning in their lives.

SOURCES:

- Webster, Jeffrey & Haight, Barbara. Critical Advances in Reminiscence Work. Springer Publishing. (2002)
- Weil, Andrew. Healthy Aging. (2005)
- Staying Sharp: Current Advances in Brain Research: NRTA/AARP and Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives (2004)

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For more information on LifeBio's programs for communities and community-based organizations, please call 1-866-LIFEBIO or 937-303-4574 or email us at info@lifebio.com. Please request an information packet or webinar on how to implement LifeBio in your community.



It's time to tell your story