

Next Steps: Life Review

By Jan Warner and Jan Collins



Question: My widowed mother, now 81, is depressed. Throughout her life, she has always looked younger than her age, and, as far back as I can remember, has been very concerned about her appearance. Although I believe her depression is primarily due to the fact that she doesn't like getting—and looking—older, she seems to have gotten worse since Dad died early last year. A friend of mine mentioned some kind of “reminiscence” procedure that supposedly helps alleviate depression and has other good effects. Is this to be believed and followed?

Answer: Your friend was referring to “structured reminiscence,” also known as “life review.” Although it has been around for decades, structured reminiscence has been getting more attention and publicity lately. While nursing homes and hospices have traditionally used this process to help dying patients resolve difficulties and find inner peace, researchers have also found that structured reminiscence has many health benefits for people who are *not* dying.

According to studies done at the University of Washington, University of Ottawa, University of North Carolina-Greensboro, and Wayne State University, a major benefit of structured reminiscence is that it relieves age-related depression. In addition, it is said to increase self-esteem and general feelings of well-being and may well lead to improved cognitive functioning. And, because depression weakens the immune system, the corollary is that relieving depression *strengthens* the immune system, thereby hastening healing and reducing symptoms of such maladies as asthma and arthritis.

Some psychotherapists and counselors use structured reminiscence and life review activities in counseling older adults, considering it to be a powerful tool in assessing and treating the elderly. As part of this process, individuals look back at their entire lifetimes, trying to resolve unresolved past conflicts, accept negative experiences, and celebrate accomplishments and good experiences. Some medical schools, including the University of South Carolina School of Medicine, teach prospective doctors in a life-review course how to conduct reminiscences with their older patients.

You yourself might be able to guide your mother through a life review process, if both of you are willing and able. For starters, you'd have to have good listening skills and feel comfortable conducting an interview. And you must understand that not all older people want to remember the past: some older folks may focus on past traumatic events and become increasingly upset.

But if doing a life review interests you and your mother, here are some tips from experts in the field:

- Playing music or sounds of an earlier time might be helpful.
- Be gentle, and go at a leisurely pace.
- Ask open-ended questions, such as “What were your early years like?” “Who were your best childhood friends?” “What were your happiest days?” “What would you like said about you in your epitaph?” These kinds of queries can lead to profound insights.
- Don't be judgmental in your responses.

Some families audio- or video-tape the interviews, leaving behind a priceless legacy for the family. Others hire professionals to do the work. Colorado writer Andrea Gross and her husband, Irv Green, began their own company, Legacy Prose, in 2000 and told NextSteps they now spend most of their time “helping people turn memories into memoirs.” (legacyprose.com)

This couple usually does eight to ten hours of taped interviews for their clients, then transcribes the tapes, organizes and writes the memories, and presents the finished product in whatever format is requested – perhaps a single book on handmade paper; or multiple covers of a hardcover book, or a typed manuscript in a three-ring binder. (Gross, a veteran professional writer, says she decided to launch the business after interviewing her own elderly parents several years ago and noticing how much it cheered them up.)

“Telling their stories makes them feel important,” says Gross, “and the stories make them feel immortal. Why wouldn’t it make you feel better to go back to the time when you were calling the shots, when you were powerful and strong?”

Taking the NextStep: If talking is good therapy, then “life review” or “reminiscence” is simply talking raised to a higher, more structured degree. And for many people, it seems to work. But remember: if you unwittingly happen to be part of a “bad event”, you may do more harm than good. And, you may just want to leave this process to experts, especially if you have little patience and don’t want to mess up what could be a good thing.