

Remember the Studebaker?

Reminiscing as Therapy for Your Parents

by Paula Tchirkow, MSW, LSW, ACSW

Not again? You've heard that story about Sunday trips in the big black Studebaker at least 100 times. But you sit politely as your elderly mother recalls her grandfather's rumble seat, running boards, chrome grill and overflowing picnic

It's likely that your mother has not forgotten that she told you the story before. And she's not just shooting the breeze or living in the past. Your elderly parent is bolstering her self esteem by reminiscing. Like many older adults, she is engaging in an important psychological process called "life cycle review," and it's healthy.

Encouraging an older adult to reminisce is one of the easiest and most effective techniques you can use to boost their confidence and brighten their mood. In fact, it's virtually foolproof as a method of combating mild depression or loneliness.

Go ahead, give it a try. Next time the Studebaker story comes up, engage your mother. Ask her how many people fit in the car? Did it have a rag top? How fast did it go? What were the roads like back then? And what exactly was in that picnic basket?

The vivid connection to a time when your mother or father felt more alive, happier, successful, and useful reassures them that they weren't always in their current physical and mental state. Reminiscing helps older adults review past accomplishments and activities, thereby giving them a renewed sense of fulfillment about their life.

Although most people tend to focus on good memories, life cycle review can also help older family members become comfortable with the past. That is,



the technique gives older adults an opportunity to admit and accept the parts of their lives that didn't go as well as expected.

Both the reckoning process, and the acknowledgement of happier times, clears up minor depression, reverses feelings of isolation, and helps parents get back into a rhythm of positive reinforcement that boosts physical and mental well being. To be sure, the benefits of story telling and review are greatly underestimated.

To discover how valuable life cycle review can be for older adults, here are 10 tips to help you get the process started:



- On your next visit, quickly survey the home for an object to spark a conversation. For example, a cookbook may start the person talking about a favorite recipe or holiday. A piece of antique furniture, nick-knacks, old records, needlepoint projects, a piece of clothing, even a dish towel has worked as a catalyst for conversation.

- Visit the attic. If you're not having luck with the items that are in plain view, don't be shy about taking a trip to the attic or basement to dig out old photos, cards and letters, maybe a wedding dress. Personal props such as these can trigger a flood of memories and conversations.

- Use scents. Without fail, certain smells bring back memories almost instantaneously. That may be because the sense of smell is the most primitive of our senses, and the last to fail. Even older adults suffering from advance stages of dementia usually respond to smells, albeit not verbally. For instance, their eyes may brighten or a smile may appear when they get a whiff of cinnamon, wildflowers, fresh baked goods, peppermint, or coffee.

- Create reminiscing cards. Browse magazines, newspapers, or the Internet to find images of items that you know will prompt a conversation, such as

from a parent's childhood, places they visited on vacation. Paste the pictures onto pieces of cardboard and build a catalog of visual aids. The cards can be used by family members or healthcare workers who look after your parent.

■ Don't shrink from the unhappy memories. Recounting less-than-perfect events can be cathartic. Reflection doesn't always have to be rosy, and often unlocking long-forgotten disappointments is uplifting. It's a way for older adults to get worn-out burdens off their chest. For instance, you may hear from an older widow, that if she had to do it all over again, she would not have married her husband. The key is to let people freely express doubts and fears about the past, and validate—don't judge—those feelings. Interestingly, and sort of magically, we all become less inhibited about expressing feelings as we get older. So don't shut out the more sobering events for fear that it might depress your parent - the exercise will likely raise their spirits.

■ Do it on the phone, in person, or on the Internet if your parent is computer savvy. These reminiscing sessions can take the form of a 15 minute phone conversation; an hour-long respite over tea, maybe a look through a photo album after Christmas dinner. There is no set length of time or frequency that is ideal. The amount of time you spend recollecting is case specific, and usually depends on the attention span of the older person.

■ Encourage in-home health aids or the staff at healthcare facilities to use the technique too. It's a great alternative to stale topics, like the weather. For parents that live in care facilities, create a personal history poster to hang over their bed. In that way, healthcare workers can refer to the poster when they visit the room. Include things like your parent's nickname, former profession, how they met their spouse, the names of their children, grandchildren and pets, hobbies, favorite movies, songs, or books, towns and cities where they lived, or any other piece of personal trivia that will guide the staff into a rewarding conversation. Aside from prompting

conversation, the fun facts help the staff envision your parent as someone other than a frail or stubborn resident.

■ Assemble a scrapbook. For parents that can physically handle this task, it's a great way to organize memories and start a new hobby - one that can be shared by the whole family. Include photos, ticket stubs, fabrics from, say, a wedding dress, newspaper clippings, recipes, and other homespun memorabilia. For parents that are unable to create a scrapbook, adult children can put it together, and keep it handy as a conversation starter. If you're making a scrapbook for parents with advanced Alzheimer's disease or dementia, keep the book short and simple.



■ Allow your parents to reap the physical benefits. Recollecting good memories, and dropping old burdens, has a positive physiological effect on older adults. Research shows that sparking these memories causes blood pressure and heart rates to drop, essentially producing a calming effect. (Pet therapy produces the same effect.)

■ Document the past for the future. There's something in life cycle review for everyone involved, especially future generations. Photos and scrapbooks are often considered family treasures, but a new generation of archivist are using audio and video tapes as well. Use new technology to capture a little bit of your family's past, just make sure you hang on to the right playback equipment or your memories could be lost - remember the fate of eight-track players?

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