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Life Review in Aging: A Primer

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Humans are narrative beings. We understand and speak of ourselves and the events of our lives in the context of stories. The stories we tell are influenced by our lived experiences, the quality of our memories (what's recalled and forgotten), relationships, personality styles, values, accomplishments, regrets, spiritual beliefs, and a host of other factors. Telling our stories from the vantage point of old age is reflective of a maturational process of introspection and discovery called *life review*.

Life review is both a natural self-exploration and an evidence-based intervention to promote well-being, especially (but not exclusively) with older adults. As a process in aging, life review is about framing one's life in the past, present *and* future. It is about expressing what matters to the individual, hopes for days to come, and personal legacy (i.e., What about "me" will live on after death?). Life review interventions harness this natural process to promote well-being in settings where elders gather and/or receive care (e.g., senior centers, retirement communities, hospitals, clinics, hospices, support groups). Evidence-based approaches are available for application by just about any social service and health professional.

The desire and need to reminisce is at the heart of life review. We reminisce about past experiences as children and throughout life, yet the deeper meanings of our narratives often do not come into true focus until later in life. The perspective gained over many years is part of it. The recognition that life is finite is another common motivator. When young, it is easy to focus our energies on making our lives happen. Common milestones – graduation, marriage and family, career – serve as guideposts along the way, with more to look forward to. Old age and death can seem far in the future, and the busyness of earning a living and managing a household can leave little time or energy for intentional, productive introspection.

That's not to say that we don't recall the past when young. On the contrary, most of us reminisce naturally each day, both in our thoughts and socially with others. The internet is a popular platform for such reminisce today. Sharing meaningful stories is, at once, enjoyable and also critical to well-being and identity. Who doesn't enjoy and benefit from reminiscing with an old friend from high school, for example? Change is a part of life, too. By reminiscing, we know ourselves and maintain a sense of personal continuity despite often big life changes (i.e., "At my core, I am still the same person at 40 that I was at 20").

Something changes in older age, however, and this is where *life review*, as a maturational process and a helping intervention, comes to the fore. Milestones, such retirement, downsizing, changing health or functional status, and the like, redirect awareness to the reality of life as finite, desires to make the most of each day, and preparation for death. This is the natural way of things for most persons who live to the 6th decade and beyond. Many older people report a resurgence of “forgotten” memories, richer emotional experiences, and deeper (though often fewer) interpersonal connections. The stage is thus set for life review.

We owe much of our current understanding of life review in aging to Robert Butler, a prominent psychiatrist and founding director of the US National Institute on Aging (among many notable accomplishments). Starting in the 1960’s and throughout his career, Butler challenged the medical establishment to look past the disease/decline model of aging and see the richness and value that advancing age also brings. He spoke, specifically, about reminiscence and life review activities as both normal (i.e., not simply dwelling in the past) and essential to personal growth and well-being in the latter years of life. His work spawned five plus decades of academic and clinical writing and research on life review processes and their benefits for individuals and groups.

Another early pioneer was gerontologist, James Birren, who founded the Guided Autobiography movement. GAB, as it is more often known, is a group-based intervention built around important life themes (e.g., family, career and major life work, health and body image, loves and hates). Participants explore these themes together with the help of a GAB leader over ten (or more) group meetings, while writing individually in between. A benefit of group-based life review is the iterative process of recall and reflection; one member’s shared experiences trigger memories and reflections in others. This process can be especially powerful when many or all members are of a similar age (cohort), as shared milestones and historical experiences can trigger even deeper connections. Participants gain from shared discussions as well as from their personal writing. The *Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies* offers an excellent web-based certification program for prospective GAB leaders.

Life review is more than simply a series of stories strung together from a person’s life. Rather, it is *an intentional looking back on one’s life experiences to bring understanding and meaning to the present (and future)*. The *meaning* aspect is critical, and may include examination of paths taken, choices made, influential relationships (for good or bad), valued accomplishments, failures and lessons learned, regrets, etc. Beliefs about death and afterlife (if relevant) are especially important areas for examination and clarification. For those undertaking a life review in the face of terminal illness, the process may also include discussion of how one’s death will occur, how survivors will carry on, and personal legacy beliefs.

Life review is *intentional* in that everything is on the table for consideration, and there's a felt desire to explore experiences from birth to the present. Not everyone must do a life review. While it is a natural process, such self-exploration is also a choice and involves a certain level of vulnerability. Life review should never be forced on anyone. A common refrain heard by this author goes something like this: "My 85 year old mother (substitute any close relation) has lived such a great life, and I really want her to work with you to record her life story for the family to have when she's gone." The daughter, in this case, is well-intentioned and her mother may, indeed, want to record her life story. Or, she might like to explore her life privately and not record anything permanent. Or, she might prefer to keep all to herself. There is no right answer, except that a person must choose to participate in a life review willingly.

Numerous life review interventions have been developed for individual and 1:1 implementation. All share a therapeutic objective – whether to promote socialization, enhance mood, improve coping, identify legacy – but not all are therapeutic in a formal, clinical sense. Three levels have been posited: (1) simple reminiscence, (2) structured reminiscence as life review, and (3) life review psychotherapy. Level 1 is most often a spontaneous, unstructured experience involving a subset of lived experiences. Any benefits are incidental to the process of self-discovery. Level 2 is mostly what this chapter is about. It is a structured effort to examine most of the life story, but need not occur in a formal clinical or care setting. The leader may be a professional, but could just as well be a caring lay person. Again, benefits are incidental to the process. GAB groups are at this level. In contrast, Level 3 is always directed by a licensed professional with specific clinical and therapeutic objectives.

A common Level 2 intervention involves an interviewer (therapeutic listener) and a reviewer, with meetings spread over a period of days or weeks. These sessions may be recorded (video, audio), summarized in writing (narrative, summary notes, poetry), or captured in other ways (drawings or other works of art or music). The product is less important than the process of doing the interview, but for many people the product becomes a valued living legacy for grandchildren and others to have. Many self-help books are also available, as are websites, computer programs, and other resources for creating and disseminating such products. A new trend in the field is called "memory banking."

In the 1:1 model, the usual first step is one definition and ground rules. Safety and trust are critical. The interviewer must learn from the reviewer how to proceed: What aspects of your life story are most important to discuss? Are there any you wish to avoid? Who can know about what we discuss? How much of our meetings should be recorded or saved? If a video or audio recording is pursued, who should get copies? Books by Gibson

Many issues and questions may arise in a life review. An interview may be theme-based, as in GAB, or more focused on the chronology of a person's life. Questions of fact (where were you born? what was High School did you attend?) provide the skeleton of the life story, but are less impactful than questions focused on feelings, interpretations and meanings. A question like "what did you feel inside and think when you saw and held your newborn child?" encourages active reliving of a meaningful event. Another fun question is "What foods stand out in your memory from when you were a child?" Questions with sensory elements can elicit powerful recall.

Perhaps nowhere is life review more powerful and needed than in hospice care. Persons who are actively dying often appreciate opportunities to tell about themselves, share wishes and thoughts for their survivors, and otherwise come to terms. Even those with just days to live have a future, and so life review is about life and not death. It is fair to ask, for example, what the dying person wants for the future. Life reviews in hospice may involve just one sitting. While this may not be ideal for comprehensiveness, any good faith effort to honor the lived experiences of another person can and do make a difference. Interviewers benefit, too, and families cherish the products of their efforts.

Further Readings

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