

BENEFITS OF GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY JAMES E. BIRREN

INTRODUCTION

Older adults possess an entire lifetime of autobiographical information that can be evoked and organized by priming their memories in a group setting. For 30 years, James Birren has been helping elders tell their life stories through courses in guided autobiography. In the lecture partially transcribed in this article, Dr. Birren enumerates the many benefits of Guided Autobiography—both for older adults and for the organizations they frequent.

Dr. Birren presented this special lecture in March 2006 at the Joint Conference of the American Society on Aging and the National Council on Aging as part of the MindAlert program. Sponsored by the American Society on Aging and MetLife Foundation, MindAlert is dedicated to sharing the findings of the latest research on maintaining and enhancing cognitive function in later life.



GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY BENEFITS FOR INDIVIDUALS

The principle motive for people who take guided autobiography courses is usually to write their autobiography to give to their family and friends. In addition to this tangible benefit, guided autobiography offers important indirect benefits to individuals. Some of these benefits are similar to the benefits of therapy, but since it is not centered on personal problem-solving, guided autobiography is not therapy. Like having a cup of coffee or tea and a nice conversation with a colleague or friend that leads to new insights and life

changes, guided autobiography can be therapeutic without being regarded as therapy. The indirect benefits of sharing your life story in a group include increasing your self knowledge through telling your story, as well as listening to the stories of others.

Daily life tends to focus on the here and the now, the issues of the day, whereas guided autobiography leads one on paths through vast stores of memories, usually leading to an increased awareness and appreciation of having lived through so much.

Margaret N. Reedy and I studied 45 participants in a 10-session guided autobiography course, assessing where people were both before and after the course.

The group experience is very important for stimulating people's memories.

One of the surprising findings was that one of the largest changes subjects made was in their view of other people. These results suggest that if you participate in a group that shares life stories, your concept of other people becomes more like your view of yourself. When you change your views of others to become more like your view of yourself, you find other people more acceptable and more comfortable to be with. Identifying with other people in this way results in attachments and friendships among group members. Indications of such bonds are seen in the desire of guided autobiography groups to continue meeting, scheduling reunions to write

and talk about new themes. The group process of sharing life stories results in the formation of strong new friendships.

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Guided autobiography also fosters change within the self. The distances between the ideal self, the actual self, and the social-image self diminish. In this context, the ideal self is the self we would like to be, the real self is the self we believe ourselves to be, and the social-image self is how we believe other people view us. Much of the tension in adolescence presumably stems from the distances between the ideal, real, and social-image selves. Participation in guided autobiography appears to reduce the differences between these three aspects of ourselves, a change that usually leads to increased self-acceptance.

The ideal self, the actual self, and the social-image self are elements of the narrative self—the self we tell ourselves we are. In a 2004 study of 423 community residents ages 70 years and older, Gill Windle and Robert Woods regarded the narrative self as a psychological resource. In this view, guided autobiography is a pathway to a more acceptable view of the self that helps individuals adapt to life changes. When they do, the indirect benefits to individuals for participating in guided autobiography are of considerable value.

BENEFITS FOR INSTITUTIONS

Many venues, such as retirement homes, churches, community organizations and other institutions, can obtain benefits from conducting guided autobiography groups. As indicated earlier, friendships or attachments result from the group process of sharing life stories—a view supported by the fact that participants in guided autobiography groups often want to establish regular reunions. An organization for retirees that offers guided autobiography courses has the advantage of encouraging friendships that would transcend the usual level of relationships commonly found in organizations that do not offer such courses.

Such emerging attachments can be an asset in institutions and organizations, resulting in a heightened sense of community, an increase in overall organizational strength and well-being, and more volunteering by members who will have a greater bond to other members and a higher stake in the organization or institution as a whole.



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