

Stories for Wellbeing in Later Life

by
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Stories are vitally important to people. Facilitating people's stories is my job in a variety of settings. Sometimes this is with people exploring themes in later life.

I employ a range of techniques and materials, from conversation, to pictures, to creative writing drawing on literature, to objects people are asked to bring in or that are provided and spread out on the table. I bring a particular interest in oral and written stories, together with a passion for combining art forms to meet different needs.

Stories I Tell Myself and Others

This is the title of a course I devised for older people that was delivered for the first time this year in Bristol. It is designed for people aged 55+ and is an initiative with arts organization Orchard Foundation in association with the Portland Centre for Integrative Medicine, which specializes in person-centred healthcare. The holistic aims of both organisations converge, aiming to enhance people's wellbeing through providing outlets for expression and opportunities for meaning-making in a supportive environment.



The arts in healthcare can have many benefits, such as increasing confidence, and the sheer pleasure of creating something that is shared with others. Other research suggests that when people are able to write out their concerns as well as celebrate what they value, health and wellbeing, psychologically and socially – and sometimes physically – can increase. To quote a pioneer researcher into the benefits of expressive writing, US-based psychologist James Pennebaker:

'the essence of the writing technique is that it forces people to stop what they are doing and briefly and reflect on their lives. It is one of the few times that people are given permission to see where they have been and where they are going without having to please anyone. They are able to prioritise their goals, find meaning in their past and future, and think about who they are at this point in life' (Pennebaker, J. in 'The Writing Cure' edited by Lepore S J and Smyth J M, 2002)

Creative arts and themes in later life

There are many applications of creative arts with older people. Some of the approaches I have used are:

- looking at images and photographs as a way of reflecting on important life moments and sharing these, then paying more attention to them through writing a caption or short story
- taking a series of themes including 'beginnings', 'thresholds', 'challenges', 'celebrations' and providing a range of materials (sometimes literally textiles) to enable each person to find out what matters to them
- objects that have meaning – people may bring one into the session, or alternatively they are given a selection of objects such as shells, household objects, small items, useful tools, and invited to choose one and see what it evokes for them

Creative writing for wellbeing for all

Creative writing approaches are tailored to the group's needs and wishes. This doesn't mean it's all about pens and paper. Stories and writing are much broader than this – after all, we all have stories, and we all have things to say.

For some the process might involve speaking a few sentences for the first time about something important. For others it might be writing a haiku or capturing reflections captured after looking at a picture of a landscape, listening to music, or doing some gentle yoga moves.

As facilitator I aim to provide a safe environment where the pleasures of collaborative and individual creativity can be experienced by all. *'Every telling or retelling of a story, through its performance, is a new telling that encapsulates, and expands upon the previous telling'* says narrative therapist Michael White (in *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, 1990). The sessions are in community settings such as libraries, in schools, in healthcare settings such as hospitals and complementary care services.



Memory, dreams, reflections

There is increased recognition of the vital part expression and time to reflect plays in the lives of older people. Doing this with others can stimulate cognitive function as well as provide access to important memories, the harvesting of which is increasingly recognised as a creative process not merely a 'fact-gathering' exercise. As Neisser says: *'Memory is more of a process of re-creation and reinterpretation of the past than accurate recall'* (in Hunt, C. *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing*, 2000) and Bolton says that *'Writing..can create pathways to memories, feelings, and thoughts patients do not always know that they have...'* (in *'The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing* by G Bolton, 2000).

One participant commented that the creative writing activities had enabled him to 'find a voice' and reach into parts of his experience in a fresh way. Joyful things and challenges were engaged with and he found this 'immensely helpful'.

For further information about courses see

<http://www.orchardfoundation.co.uk>