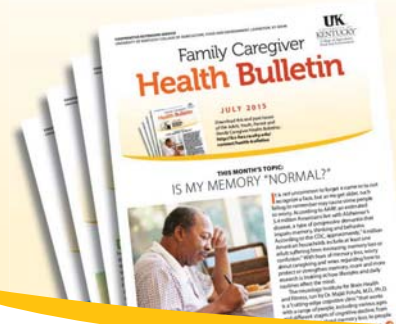


Family Caregiver Health Bulletin



APRIL 2016

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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

LIFE HISTORY: A CAREGIVING TOOL

Growing old is a gift, but with increasing age, illnesses or circumstances that cause disability, there are often challenges in addition to opportunity. Maintaining a rich and meaningful life may require care and support. Ideally, care receivers will have a voice and control in their care — such as who provides it and when and how it is provided. Sometimes, however, when disability, chronic conditions or even dementia are present, people tend to lose their voice or they may feel like they do. Person centered care does not mean that whatever someone says goes, but it does aim to focus care on the needs of one which includes respecting the person's desires, opinions and values.

One way we can be more person centered when it comes to caregiving is to know a person's life story. But all too often, a person's story is left out or goes untold, reducing a care recipient to be no more than a medical chart.



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Listening to and recording an individual's story can help caregivers better understand a person, despite disability.

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Think about Ted, for example:

After the death of his wife and unable to meet his care needs, Ted's adult children moved him into a dementia care residence. On the first night in his new "home" Ted was found wandering the halls and grabbing every door knob in sight. This behavior continued, and staff attributed it to the stress of relocation. When attempts were made to stop the wandering, Ted would become agitated and refuse to be brought back to his room. Medications were quickly prescribed to stop the night wandering and the resulting disturbances among other residents. Ted's children were baffled, however, for during the day, Ted's memory appeared only moderately compromised and he seemed to be social and quite happy. A life story interview with Ted during his third week in the care residence revealed something remarkable. Ted was asked to describe his previous home, in which he had lived for nearly 50 years, and to reflect upon his actions in and feelings about that home. Of particular importance was a long-practiced nightly ritual of checking his home's security; before going to bed, Ted would ensure that all doors were locked. With an idea that this long habit of nightly vigilance might be a clue to Ted's current wandering, the staff was provided the information and a strategy was developed. Each night a staff person would ask Ted to help her check doors and windows along one corridor of the facility, provide ongoing recognition of Ted's new responsibility and offer reinforcement through a simple statement: "Everything looks secure, Ted. Thank you!" The strategy was quite successful. Uncontrolled wandering and agitation ceased immediately and Ted slept soundly after happily attending to his responsibility each night.

Our histories make us who and what we are. Therefore, when a conscious effort is made to listen to and record an individual's story, caregivers can better appreciate and understand a person, despite disability. The result may be the development of better relationships and care plans that respect a person's values, routines... personhood.

Interviews, photographs, scrapbooks and family

trees are just a few ways to obtain and record a life story. **But it is also important to surround a person and caregivers with pieces of that life story.**

To do this, you can:

- Create and display a timeline of a person's life (a graphic history) and include experiences important to the person. This provides clues to one's past and can be used for small talk or longer discussions.
- Display shadow boxes or collages of photos that tell a person's story over time and hang it in places where the person and caregivers can see it and be reminded to talk about it.
- Talk about what a great life the person lived based on what you know.
- Discuss the person's passions, hobbies and interests to get to know the person better.
- Help the person find meaning and purpose in each and every day based on their life story.
- Acknowledge the person, even if this means saying hello more than one time. Always remember that the person, to whom you give care, may not always have been sick, frail or old.
- Incorporate life history into a care plan and respect a person's values, opinions, modesty and choices as much as you can.

Using life history as a caregiving tool can provide caregivers with a new perspective on who a person was and in return, this helps increase respect and better understanding in addition to promoting ways to start conversations, which enhances self-worth and well-being.

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