

# Creating a Life Story

## Introduction

Everyone has a past, a present and a future and everyone has a story to tell. Commencing and creating a person's life story can be a wonderful experience for everyone involved. Whether it is a daughter and Mum preserving shared experiences or a grandchild and grandparent spending time together, the activity promotes a common concern for and appreciation of the importance of the person's past, present and future. At Anchor, we use life stories to help shape the care we provide.

## What is a life story?

A life story is an individual's personal story. It has a start and is on-going to promote the person's past, present and future lifestyle choices and interests to create a living document of essential information which can grow with the person and the family.

There is no set format for developing a person's life story. It is about spending time with the person, helping them recall events, recording this information and supporting the person to express themselves by talking about their life, their experiences and thus what has made and makes them a unique individual.

## Why should you commence a life story?

Capturing a person's story including usual everyday happenings and important events in a person's life is something to do together and can be revisited over and over again and added to. It may be also something that visiting friends or family members such as grandchildren can look through with the person or parts can be referred to by professional carers to learn more about the person.

Creating and hearing a person's story produces many benefits for everyone involved. For example, for grandchildren to help them understand an older person was once just like them with a long future before them, often with similar hopes and worries as they have today. It also encourages a shared experience of learning about each other together.

For adult children it can help them understand why a person's past experiences can impact on how the person behaves now. It also provides an ongoing activity to be enjoyed together.

For all involved life story work provides a continued narrative between the past, the present and the future in every relationship.

## Why is creating a life story important to a person living with dementia?

The term dementia describes a group of symptoms caused by impact of disease on the brain. Dementia is progressive, which means the symptoms will gradually get worse. How fast the dementia progresses will depend on each individual. Dementia can be caused by a number of diseases and conditions, the most common being Alzheimer's disease.

For many people living with dementia, recalling very recent events may be difficult yet past memories may be easier to remember. Supporting someone to recall past memories focuses on what the person can do rather than what they can't. To succeed rather than fail can improve the person's self-esteem and improve their well-being.

## Life stories for people living in care homes

It is really important for care teams to know the person well; good care is built on good relationships so the more the care team know about the person the better the relationships will be.

A person's life story can provide so much valuable information; such as when the person likes to get up, what they like to eat, who their family and friends are and their hobbies and interests. It can provide information that will explain why a person behaves in a certain way today and reminds others that people who cannot communicate verbally still have something important to say and contribute.

It helps care teams to see beyond the illness and focus on the uniqueness of the individual to plan and deliver personalised care. It helps others to value the retained abilities of the person, rather than focusing on losses and can help the team to support the person to continue the pattern of their life by honouring their preferences. It also helps others to engage in meaningful conversations to provide comfort and pleasure.

## Different styles and approaches

There are a number of different styles including autobiography, where the person is the only author giving an account of their life, or biography, where the person is supported by someone or many family members to record their personal account.

The approaches to a life story tend to cover four main areas; my life reflections, my family & home life, my everyday life and my hopes & dreams.

## Templates and books

There are many styles of templates and books to record a person's story available commercially. You can also use a hardback book or a scrapbook or album with plastic pockets, so information can be added and moved around.

The more personalised and attractive it looks, the more likely the person will look inside to recall and share their memories and engage with others.

A life story of an individual can give you so much information about the person. No two people are the same and we continue to change through life experiences.

Before gathering any information through discussions it is essential to ensure the person is happy with you recording their information. Keep checking with the person throughout the process as a person's capacity to understand what you are doing can fluctuate.

## Areas to consider

- A good relationship with the person is key. The better the rapport you have, the richer the person's story will be.
- Support the person to share information they are happy to talk about. Do not pry into areas they do not want to talk about.
- Developing a life story is not a test to recall events in exact order; it should be a pleasurable process. You may need to just go with the flow.
- Some memories can be troubling, disturbing or very private. Be sensitive if an individual appears to be becoming upset or distressed; give the person the option to stop. (Some individuals though upset may want to carry on talking as a way of grieving. These feelings need to be acknowledged. Make sure you offer support and try to end on a positive memory.)
- Be aware you may discover something private about the person you did not know and this may be upsetting for you, if you find yourself in this situation. Draw the conversation to an end and move to another.
- For some people it may be more appropriate to concentrate on certain parts of their life rather than the whole of their life
- Some information shared may be very personal and the individual may not want certain information recording, so always check with them first.
- Use a pace that suits the individual. Don't rush.
- Some people are uncomfortable talking about themselves and may even feel they have nothing special to talk about. Be patient as it may take a few conversations to start to gather information.

## Where to start

There is no set formula to start a life story although the following may help.

- If you have access to old photographs it may be useful to ask the person about them. You can record key phases and memories that could start the conversation.
- A selection of pictures or personal artefact such as an ornament or piece of furniture may help to get the conversation started.
- Where possible use the person's own words. It is important to capture the person's story as they tell it.

- If you are writing down the information, always record using words such as “I” or “my” to illustrate it is the person’s words.
- Favourite songs and poems can be used to help the person recall a time or event in their lives.
- One memory may lead to another - not necessarily in chronological order.
- Try to gather important events rather than dates and times.
- Use the person’s words and phrases as they speak. It will be more accurate than trying to recall the words later on.
- If it is difficult to capture whole sentences, record key words the person uses.
- For some people, they may have difficulty recognising faces in photographs. Try photographs from different times in their lives.
- When a person refers to “home” it could have several meanings, such as here where I live now or their home from another era of their life. Listen and check with the person they were living with so you are clear about what part of their life they are talking about.

## Using pictures and photos:

Try not to use original photos if they are rare and precious and may become lost or damaged.

Instead, use colour photocopies or scanned electronic images of photos and print on a colour printer. Another advantage of using alternative versions is that more than one copy of the life story can be created. Pictures of pets are also very valuable.

## Key points

The person’s story is not a test about the past. The activity should be a pleasurable experience.

Be very aware of how the person is feeling. Listen well, give lots of support, reassure the person and be respectful of when they want to talk and what they want to include.

## Conclusion

Creating a person’s life story can be a satisfying and enriching experience for all involved. The process of developing a person’s life story should not be a chore or set up like an interview. It should be created at a pace comfortable for the person and be a pleasurable and enjoyable experience for all.

## A starting point

It can be a little difficult to know where to start. It may be useful for you to collate information into different areas such as below. Once you begin you may find some areas naturally expand and blend in to others.

<b>My childhood</b>	<b>My family</b>
<b>As a young adult</b>	<b>Key events in my life</b>
<b>My work life</b>	<b>My important people and friends</b>
<b>My hobbies and interests</b>	<b>My best days</b>
<b>My pets</b>	<b>My important memories</b>