

Avoiding Depression

by Telling Your Story



by SUSAN LYNN
REYNOLDS

Sue Reynolds is a freelance writer and instructor specializing in the therapeutic value of writing. She is currently enrolled at Trent University conducting postgraduate studies in psychology. Contact Sue at susanreynolds@trentu.ca

One of the gifts of becoming older is the wealth of experience and memories from all the years leading up to the present moment. These can be the gift that keeps on giving, however, if you choose to consciously interact with the past.

Statistics of seniors suggest that as many as 20 percent have some form of depression. Many older adults do not seek formal help for depression for a variety of reasons. Help, however, is within their grasp on an informal basis.

Studies with older adults exploring the benefits of "life review" and "reminiscence" find that a process of life review is as effective as antidepressants or formal psychotherapy in treating older adults with depression. Other studies have explored the benefits of expressive writing in coping with depression and these also have produced significant results.

What all this suggests is that taking the time to consciously engage with and express your personal history is a worthwhile pastime, whether you do it verbally or in a task like writing your memoirs. If you choose to engage with

the process in written form, it is also possible to produce a lasting document to leave for other generations.

AN ORAL LIFE REVIEW

This procedure involves getting together with another person or group of people to promote the sharing of memories. Schedule a regular time with a friend or family member to get together and reminisce. Make sure you talk about past conflicts as well as the good things that happened.

In a group or family situation it is important to have either a facilitator who will make sure that all participants have an equal opportunity to share their memories and realizations with the rest of the group or a formalized structure in place to ensure equality.

People are often reluctant to return to memories of painful times, but research into disclosure has shown that revisiting unpleasant events that the person has not talked about allows for a reintegration and resolution. Although the per-

son may harbour increased feelings of sadness immediately after expression, in the days and weeks to come they say they feel much better than they did before.

WRITING IT DOWN

If regular visits or group gatherings are not possible, writing it down can have benefits that are just as powerful. Sometimes people are intimidated at the idea of committing their memories to paper because they are afraid they don't remember the facts completely correctly. A memoir is different from an autobiography, in that it is the writer's version of the events. Any of us who have compared a memory of an event with another person who was there is likely to have experienced how two different people will have two different versions of what happened.

Call the written version a memoir, record truthfully the way you remember it, and the health benefits, both mental and physical will be yours.

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Memory Triggers:

Here are a few topics to start discussions or writing sessions. Begin by noting down the over-arching time periods of your life. Examples of eras might be childhood, the teenage years, university, early married life, the years of being a parent, empty nesting, retirement. Or you could divide your eras based on the places you lived, the jobs you held, etc.

- Begin by noting down a list of the crucial events that happened during each era to you and to those close to you (births, deaths, big trips, job promotions, marriages, etc.)
- List the pastimes and pursuits from each time
- List the people you were involved with in each era – family, friends, lovers, enemies, etc. Make note of the special relationships you had. List all the jobs you held.
- What were your goals, aspirations, and dreams in each era?
- List your educational experiences from each span of time. Don't forget skills acquired through hobbies and new interests – sports, artistic, business oriented, etc.
- What were the painful events?
- What were your accomplishments during each period? How did you get there?
- What organizations and communities were you involved with? Why did you get involved?
- What places did you live? What were the addresses? Describe what each home looked like, what grew in the garden, hung on the wall, filled up the cupboards, etc.
- Include how larger historical events and trends that shaped each era had an impact on you.