

# Enhancing Mental Health through Life Story

*Amy Hosier, Family Sciences; Brian Downer, Faika Zanjani, and John Watkins, Graduate Center for Gerontology*

*Mental health refers to overall emotional well-being, including how we think, feel, and act as we cope with life. People who are emotionally healthy are better able to cope with life's challenges, build strong relationships, and lead productive, fulfilling lives. Mental health affects more than just emotions. It can also affect physical health, sleep, appetite, concentration, and recovery from illness and disease. Like physical health, mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood. Unfortunately, too many people take their mental health for granted, focusing on it only when they sense problems. Devoting time to promote our mental health will make it stronger and healthier. Documenting and sharing life story is one way to promote emotional health.*

## Enhancing Mental Health through Life Story

A life story is an account of the series of events that make up our life and describe who we are. The story of our life is important because it helps illustrate where we have been, how we got there, where we are now, and even where and what we will be doing in the future. Documenting our life story encourages us to constructively think about and examine both positive and negative personal experiences, the meaning and emotions we attach to our experiences, and the lessons we have learned over time. This process can improve well-being, prevent late-life despair, and also help us plan for the future.

Health history, a component of life story, is an account of our personal and family medical story including information about existing diseases, previous health problems, injuries, medications, surgical procedures, and physical/mental conditions that run in our family. Health history is important because it helps us, those we care about, and our health care providers to better understand our medical concerns and conditions. Because mental health is shaped by experiences, including biological and genetic factors, the knowledge gained from life story, including health history, nourishes personal characteristics, defines identity, creates community, bonds and relationships, and helps future generations understand their genetic risk factors.

Life story promotes mental health in several ways.

- **“Me time.”** A life story is personal and meaningful, and the process of writing it uses our brain and challenges our memory and creativity. It can also provide a sense of purpose and importance.
- **Reflection.** Writing and sharing our life story forces us to think about both the good and the bad times in our life. It provides us with opportunities to examine the underlying meaning we have attached to specific events and experiences. We can recognize patterns among our emotions, choices, and behaviors when we identify and reflect upon events and experiences that bring us down as well as those that bring us joy. Sometimes reflecting on the past can be difficult; however, coming to terms and growing from our life story can promote mental health. Reflection can also encourage us to think about the future in regard to upcoming plans, decisions, dreams, and aspirations.

*Good mental health helps us look at life's good and bad times through a constructive lens so that we can use our focus, flexibility, and creativity to solve problems.*

- **Awareness.** By examining our life story, we may discover patterns among events and experiences that appeal to our senses—sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. For example, does the smell of a baking apple pie remind you of a happy family tradition? Does a certain song lift your mood?
- **Problem-solving and stress management.** A written document of life experiences allows us to track the ways in which we handled past situations. An examination of what we did well or not so well can help us resolve issues and stress more effectively and be a better problem-solver in the future.
- **Supportive relationships.** Supportive relationships are the foundation of emotional health. Sharing our experiences, the meaning behind them, and why those experiences are important brings new insights and inspiration to a relationship. Sharing our life story provides friends and family with an opportunity to better understand and relate to us. Social trust and bonds are strengthened when we share personal information about needs, fears, and desires. Future generations can also benefit by better understanding their genetic risk factors. Strong personal relationships can also decrease feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and depression as well as improve overall self-esteem.
- **Communication.** Life stories help us share the good and the bad parts of life and how these events and experiences affect us. Sharing helps others better understand who we are and what is meaningful to us, including future plans and decisions.

## Mental Health and Well-Being

In order to maintain and strengthen mental health, it is important to pay attention to our own needs and feelings. It is important to not let stress and negative emotions take over our lives. When we take care of our mental health, we are better prepared to deal with challenges when they arise. People who are mentally healthy can better experience:

- Fun and laughter, and overall happiness and satisfaction with life
- Enjoyment in living—having a sense of purpose
- Stress management
- Resiliency (being strong) when dealing with hardship and difficulty
- Balance of positive and negative personal perceptions
- Self-confidence and high self-esteem

- New experiences
- Adapting to change
- Emotions, by recognizing and expressing them appropriately
- Gratifying relationships
- Balance in life (work, play, rest, activity)

People who are mentally healthy can and do go through rough periods. Disappointments, loss, change, hardships, genetic factors, and negative experiences happen, and they can cause stress, anxiety, and sadness. We should seek professional help if we still do not feel better after making efforts to improve our mental state. Input from a knowledgeable professional can motivate us to do things for ourselves that we are challenged to do on our own. Lingering behaviors that require immediate attention include:

- Inability to sleep or sleeping too much
- Eating too much or too little
- Feeling down, hopeless, helpless, nervous, or worried most of the time
- Concentration problems that are interfering with your work or home life
- Using nicotine, food, drugs, or alcohol to cope with difficult emotions
- Experiencing negative or self-destructive thoughts or fears that you can't control
- Unexpected personality or mood shifts
- Thoughts of death or suicide

## Conclusion

No matter what has shaped our mental health, it is never too late to make changes that will improve mental well-being. The process of creating a life story promotes mental health because it empowers us to constructively examine our lives and the way in which we are living it. It helps us get to the heart of who we are and what is important. It provides us with lessons regarding life's challenges, reminds us to embrace the good times, and promotes planning for the future. The sharing of life story also promotes supportive relationships, a foundation for emotional health.

*Documenting life story encourages mental health because it helps us recognize meaning and purpose through the examination of life's highs and lows.*

## Resources

### Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services

100 Fair Oaks Lane 4E-D  
Frankfort, KY 40621-0001  
(502) 564-4456

<http://dbhdid.ky.gov/dbh/default.asp>

**Memory Banking.** Contact your local Extension Agent for more information about this life story program. Memory Banking is a 4-week program designed to increase participant's knowledge and skills to collect, document, and maintain life stories and health histories. The program is valuable for promoting an active brain, quality relationships, mental healthiness, and legacy building.

### Mental Health America of Kentucky

120 Sears Avenue, Suite 213  
Louisville, KY 40207-5072  
Telephone: 1-888-705-0463

[www.mhaky.org/](http://www.mhaky.org/)

### National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)-Kentucky

c/o Somerset Community College

808 Monticello Street

Somerset, Kentucky 42501

(606) 451-6935 or (606) 451-6936;

toll free: 1-800-257-5081

[www.nami.org/MSTemplate.cfm?micrositeID=157](http://www.nami.org/MSTemplate.cfm?micrositeID=157)

## References

- Butler, R.N. (1963). The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry*, 26(1), 65-76.
- Chao, S. Y., Liu, H.Y., Wu, C.Y., Jin S.F., Chu, T.L., Huang, T.S., & Clark, M.J. (2006). The effects of group reminiscence therapy on depression, self esteem, and life satisfaction of elderly nursing home residents. *Journal of Nursing Research*, 14(1), 36-45.
- Chiang, K., Lu, R., Chu, H., Chang, Y., & Chou, K. (2008). Evaluation of the effect of a life review group program on self-esteem and life satisfaction in the elderly. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 23(1), 7-10.
- Creek, J., Lougher, L., & Van Bruggen, H. (2008). *Occupational Therapy and Mental Health*. Philadelphia: Churchill Livingstone Elsevier.
- Fosha, D., Siegal, M., S., & Solomon, F., M. (2009). *The Healing Power of Emotion: Affective Neuroscience, Development and Clinical Practice*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Haight, B.K., Michel, Y., & Hendrix, S. (2000). The extended effects of the life review in nursing home residents. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 50(2), 151-168.
- Kenyon, G.M., & Randall, W.L. (1997). *Restoring our lives: Personal growth through autobiographical reflection*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Lee-Baggley, D., Preece, M., & Delongis, A. (2005). Coping with interpersonal stress: role of big five traits. *J Pers*, 73(5), 1141-1180.
- Mann, M., Hosman, C. M., Schaalma, H. P., & de Vries, N. K. (2004). Self-esteem in a broad-spectrum approach for mental health promotion. *Health Educ Res*, 19(4), 357-372.
- Netuveli, G., Wiggins, R. D., Montgomery, S. M., Hildon, Z., & Blane, D. (2008). Mental health and resilience at older ages: Bouncing back after adversity in the British Household Panel Survey. *J Epidemiol Community Health*, 62(11), 987-991.
- Nygren, Alex, Jonsen, et al. 2005
- Peck, M.D. (2001). Looking back at life and its influence on subjective well-being. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 35(2), 3-20.
- Rybarczyk, B., & Bellg, A. (1997). *Listening to life stories: A new approach to stress intervention in health care*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Smith, M., Segal, R., & Segal, J. (2012). Improving emotional health: Strategies and tips for good mental health. Retrieved February 25, 2012 from HelpGuide.org: [http://helpguide.org/mental/mental\\_emotional\\_health.htm](http://helpguide.org/mental/mental_emotional_health.htm).
- Swami, V., Persaud, R., & Furnham, A. (2011). The recognition of mental health disorders and its association with psychiatric scepticism, knowledge of psychiatry, and the Big Five personality factors: an investigation using the overclaiming technique. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol*, 46(3), 181-189.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Surgeon General. [www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth).
- Vaccaro, P. J. (1999). Putting "life" back into your professional life. *Family Practice Management* 6(3), 66.
- Warden, J., W. (2009). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner*. New York: Springer Publishing.
- Wells, J., Barlow, J., Stewart-Brown, S. (2003). A systematic review of universal approaches to mental health promotion in schools. *Health Education*, 103(4), 197-220.