

# FAMILY CAREGIVER

# HEALTH BULLETIN



**OCTOBER 2024**

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## THIS MONTH'S TOPIC

# STORYTELLING ENHANCES CAREGIVING



**A**s a 20-year-old college student working the evening shift as an aide in an assisted living facility, I remember the night I felt impatient while a resident readied herself for bed. She was the last resident who needed help then I could finish my tasks. Maybe I'd find time to study for an exam before my shift ended. As she brushed her teeth for what seemed like too long, I examined the photos on her walls. Tears welled in my eyes. The collage included photos from different stages in the resident's life — a baby in an oversized diaper, a young girl playing in the snow with siblings, driving her dad's Packard, working in a department store, her wedding day, her babies. She lived a full life and had wonderful stories. Yet there I stood, temporarily frustrated over a toothbrush and time spent in the bathroom.

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# The people for whom we provide care are more than their chart or ailment. They have important memories, experiences to share, and stories that make up their life.

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This story, her story, made me a better caregiver. It reinforced empathy and made my future caregiving experiences much more personal and richer. It is easy to get wrapped up in the all-consuming demands of caregiving. As a result, it is easy to forget that the people for whom we provide care are more than their chart or ailment. They have important memories, experiences to share, and stories that make up their life. With dementia, sometimes unlocking a story can be a puzzle. But together, as you reminisce about the past or use old photos or songs for props, the recollection and sharing of life stories encourages a sense of connection. Storytelling puts the person first rather than their disease or frailty.

According to research from the Benjamin Rose Institute of Aging, life stories build empathy and create connections. Caregivers in this program report how life story programs empower not just empathic care but also personalized care.

Mr. Jones' story did not just help personalize his care. His story influenced the types of medication he was prescribed. Mr. Jones lived in a memory care unit because of progressing memory loss. He would get agitated at night, wander the halls, and make noise. The care team thought he was depressed and anxious and treated him medically to help manage his behavior. A physical therapist who explored his life story during a session found out that Mr. Jones served as a night watchman for years before he retired. She suggested that the doors and long hallways of the facility could be unsettling to a man who spent his career checking for safety. She asked the night aides to take Mr. Jones along with them for evening rounds. After a few nights of feeling like he was securing the building, Mr. Jones would say goodnight and go to bed — unmedicated. Through learning his life story, the staff in Mr. Jones' facility was able to contribute to his mental, emotional, and physical well-being.



According to research in the *Care Management Journal*, learning life stories can enhance overall satisfaction in care received. It can also lead to better care. This is because stories like Mr. Jones' enhance communication. Ultimately, better communication increases quality care and reduces caregiver burnout and associated stress, negative feelings, strain, depression, and anxiety.

Lastly, storytelling is a method for learning more about and sharing your family and its history. Sometimes you can even take home some lessons that you can apply to your own life or just smile with the satisfaction of having learned a great family legend. Storytelling taught me to create a collage wall in my grandmother's assisted living apartment so her aides could learn her story and all about what an amazing person she is — and was — while she is brushing her teeth.

#### REFERENCE:

Hayes, J. (2024). 4 Ways that Storytelling Benefits Older People and Their Caregivers. Benjamin Rose Institute on Aging. Retrieved June 10, 2024 from <https://guideposts.org/positive-living/health-and-wellness/caregiving/family-caregiving/aging-parents/4-ways-that-storytelling-benefits-older-people-and-their-caregivers>

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