

The Life Story

Each of us has a unique life history and story to tell. But for the person living with dementia, the life story begins to fade or sometimes memories of events from long ago begin to change. As a family caregiver, you will become the keeper of the life story. It can be emotionally challenging to look back at your loved one's story knowing that they are different than in the past or may not remember important events, such as your anniversary or birth of your (grand)children.

In short, a life story is a brief summary of a person's course over their life, significant people, events, and characteristics. It provides history and an understanding of who the person is, especially when Alzheimer's disease or another dementia changes their ability and words to express this.

Recording your person's story in a way that others can use it to stay connected to your loved one is an essential task. When used by others, they can show compassion and respect. They know what topics your loved one likes to reminisce or hear about, it values their life's work, culture and history, and it can help provide ideas to stay engaged with your loved one to the end.

Brief life stories are very helpful for those who don't have a history with your loved one. At the same time, they can bring new insights to those who know your person but don't have a full picture of their life story or interests. Things to include in the story include:

- Their preferred name/nickname
- Significant family members and friends (those they love to talk about v. those who bring pain)
- Work history or life accomplishments
- Favorite stories, places, travels, pets
- Favorite TV shows, music, food, and beverages
- Preferences for comfort: bedtime, shower/grooming, mealtime, use of touch
- Spiritual practices: scripture, poems, music, religious relics

You can write out the life story on a single sheet of paper and display it in a place that those coming into the home/residential setting can see it. In addition, you can collate a book of old pictures that visit places and people from the past. These pictures that are "worth a thousand words," can be enjoyed without ever asking a question. Rather, use reflections such as, "You were such a handsome man!" "Look at that beautiful dress." "It sure looks like they were having fun!"

Perhaps another family member would like to help you with the life story and/or creating a photo album. This is a gift for your loved one that will give back to all who enter his/her life moving forward. It is a reminder of a life that had and still has value – right to the end.