

MEMORIES ARE TOO PRECIOUS TO LOSE

Mary S. is 92, vivacious, witty, and spry. She lives with her daughter, Alice, who has spent her the last 40 years taking care of “Mother”. Unfortunately, Mary has Alzheimer’s disease. During a recent office visit, I asked Mary about life at home. She told me a housemaid was there every day to cook, clean and do laundry. When I asked the name of this housemaid, she pointed to her daughter. Mary went on to tell me she had never married, nor had she borne any children. In the background, Alice dissolved into tears. The memory of being a mother was gone.

Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia in persons 65 and older. One of the first symptoms is a mild memory lapse. However, as time goes by, people with Alzheimer’s have more frequent bouts of memory loss. At first, recent memory is affected with problems such as remembering to lock the door, where the car is parked or if a bill was paid. As the disease begins to sweep over the brain, older memories are lost. Over time, whole lifetimes are eventually erased. This loss can be one of the most difficult challenges to the individual with Alzheimer’s and their caregivers.

As a health care provider for memory impaired patients, I counsel families about the long- term effects of this disease. We talk about medication, exercise, and nutrition as immediate interventions to slow disease progression. But we also talk of the inevitable losses. One of the projects I suggest to families is recording a memoir of their loved ones life.

Most people believe “there’s nothing special about me” or, more likely, “who would care to know about that”? I counter with the suggestion that we all would like to know more about the people who made us. Did they have the same hopes, dreams and fears that we do? Preserving a lifetime of memories is so much more valuable than some faded photo in an album.

The hardest part is getting started. I suggest purchasing a small, hand-held tape recorder and conducting interviews. Video recordings are another option but require more time and expertise. Recording sessions should be conducted in a quiet, comfortable environment and be of limited duration. Choose a topic of interest to talk about and expand from there. Interviews can be conducted by any family member or friend and will add to the information elicited. In this process, you may learn more about your loved one than you ever imagined. Below are a list of questions that my help guide your interviews. These are suggestions; feel free to improvise.

Childhood

Where were you born?
What was your childhood home like? Your neighborhood?
Who lived in your house?
Did you have brothers and sisters? Did you get along?
Were you close to them?
What was your parent's relationship like?
What did your father do? Your mother?
Which of them were you closest to?
What were your hobbies? How did you pass the time?
Where did you go to school? Did you like it? Your favorite subject?
What were you like at school?
How far did you go?
What were the happiest times of your childhood?
Your biggest disappointment?
Who was the most important person in your life as a child?
What did you want to be when you grew up?
Who was your best friend?
Did you have pets?
Who was your first romance?

Work

What was your first job? How did you get it?
Were you in the military? What branch?
What did you do? Where were you stationed?
Were you proud? Frightened?
What are some of the jobs you've had in your life?
What was the best job? What was the worst?
Were you ever fired?
How did you make your living? How did you choose that?
Was there someone who had an impact on your career choice?
Would you have wanted to do something else?
Do you feel you made a difference?

Love

How did you meet your spouse?
When did you know you were going to marry?
Were you in love at the start or did the relationship take time?
What are the secrets to a good relationship?
What do (did) you love most about your spouse? The least?
What was the most difficult thing you went through while being married?
Have you married more than once?

Family

When did you decide to have children? How many?
What was the most rewarding thing you remember about raising kids?
The least?
What was the worst thing you went through with your family?
Did you have a favorite family vacation?
Were you a good parent? Do you have any parenting advice?
Would you have done anything differently as a parent?
Who is most like you? Least like you in the family?

You

Who knows you better than anyone?
Who is the most important person in your life right now?
Do you have a favorite book? Movie?
If you could go anywhere, where would it be?
What is the most amazing place you have ever seen?
What makes you laugh the most? What makes you sad?
What is your most beloved possession?
Tell me five things you can't live without.
What is the bravest thing you have ever done?
The scariest? The dumbest?
Is there anything you ever wanted to do but never did?
Would you rather be living somewhere else right now?
What would I be most surprised to learn about you?

You and me

How do you think we are alike? How are we different?
What have been your favorite times with me?
Are you happy with the way we get along?
Is there anything you've never been able to ask me or say to me?
Is there anything you wish had been different between us?

Your life

What were the best years of your life?
What was the hardest decision you ever had to make?
What are the most important things in your life?
What is your best trait? Your worst?
Do you believe in God?
Is life easier or harder now than when you were young?
Is there anything you would change in your past if you could?
What are you most proud of?
What is your favorite joke?
Do you have a favorite story? Tell me.
What do you want to be remembered for?

These are some examples of questions that may help guide you in recording a life history. Let the topic change as thoughts and feelings are examined. If some areas are too painful, move to another. Take your time and be thoughtful of the deep emotions you may be stirring up. Other options include leaving the recorder with the individual to tape their own thoughts.

Now that you have this information, what do you do with it? Certainly, save the tapes. Hearing a loved ones voice will provoke our own memories in years to come. Some opt to have the tapes transcribed into written format. This allows other family members and friends to partake in the process and provides a legacy for future generations. What a priceless gift.