

Your life, your story

medicSA's managing editor **Heather Millar** also works as a volunteer with palliative care patients to record their memoirs. Here she explores the benefits of telling your life story.



IT was shortly before my father died that I recorded his memoirs and made them into a book. Difficult though the process was, it

ignited something in me. I went on to volunteer in the Biography Program at Calvary's Mary Potter Hospice, recording the stories of people in palliative care.

I have witnessed firsthand the value people get from reviewing their life in this way. I have seen them light up as they relate their stories. It seems to be a process of making sense of one's life – was it a good one? Did I do it well? Did I live it fully? Was it worth something, in the end? Recording their story and having it written down leaves behind evidence that they existed and that perhaps their life was meaningful in some way.

My father jotted his stories down in spidery handwriting on the back of a pile of used envelopes. It was quite a towering stack by the time we got around to recording them. Having lived on his own for the last years of his life after my mother died, this act of recording his memories gave him a reason to get up in the morning – a sense of purpose.

Purpose has in fact been found to be a defining feature in mental health. Researchers from the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center in Chicago tracked 1000 people over seven years, with the average age of around 80. They found that people who had a high level of purpose were more than twice as likely to remain free from Alzheimers, had 30% less cognitive decline and half the mortality rate. They also found a strong sense of purpose created more satisfaction and happiness, better physical functioning, and better sleep.

But why wait until people are palliative? Perhaps this kind of life examination through the process of self-reflection can add value throughout our lives?



There are certainly health benefits – albeit anecdotal – according to biographers who work in the area. Paul English is a videographer of life stories, and president of Life Stories Australia, a professional association of personal historians.

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"Telling your story can help validate your life, career and achievements," says Paul. "Not only can it be tremendously cathartic and help to lift mood, but also serve as a wonderful way of connecting the generations, acting as a sort of conversation starter between grandparent and grandchild.

"Even documenting a person's career as they come to retirement can be tremendously worthwhile and provide a transition into the next stage of their life. We've done life story videos for people as young as 50 and 60 and all the way into their 90s."

When people pass away, so often their stories die with them. The older I have become, the more I want to know about my grandparents and great-grandparents and how they lived.

In another study, a team of psychologists from Emory University in Atlanta, USA, measured children's resilience and found that those who knew the most about their family history were best able to handle stress, had a stronger sense of control over their lives and higher self-esteem. The reason: these children had a stronger sense of 'intergenerational self' – ie, they understood that they belonged to something bigger than themselves.

I have spent the last few years researching my family tree. I have learned about ancestors I barely knew

existed, and I have learned their stories – because someone wrote them down. I have learned about the boy from Scotland – my great-great grandfather on my father’s side – who was sent to Australia as an ‘apprentice’ – a term they used for the youngest convict boys. I learned about the 13 children he had, and how he and his sons were some of the original foresters of South Australia. I learned about the 16-year-old girl from Tipperary and her husband who were sent to India with the British Army. And how, at 21, she ‘sat down to dinner one Sunday, and by the next, they were all gone’ – her husband and two baby boys had contracted the plague and died very suddenly. She went on to marry her husband’s best friend – my great-great grandfather on my mother’s side – and started a new family, so she didn’t have to return to Ireland, where the Potato Famine was ravaging the country. I also learned about the line of newspaper-men I am descended from, that I didn’t



know existed until just before my mother died.

Their stories make me understand myself more, my history, my impulses, my talents. I feel connected to something greater ... I feel connected to their stories, and to my own

ancestral line. The truth is ... I feel less alone in the world, knowing where I come from.

Heather Millar is a writer, editor and ghostwriter. For more information on life stories, go to zestcommunications.com.au and lifestoriesaustralia.com.au.



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