Conducting Oral Histories: Creating a Legacy for Future Generations

Tess Bird, DPhil, managing editor of Caring for the Ages and medical anthropologist, talks about the many benefits of sharing and documenting your loved one’s stories.

Have you ever thought about saving the stories of your loved one for future generations? An oral history is a historical archive and a good way to record both well-known and lesser-known family stories in the voice of a family member. Audio and video recordings alike can be preserved, and grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and others who may never get to meet your loved one can enjoy their stories.

Giving a loved one a chance to talk about their lives can also be tremendously therapeutic. It can help them make sense of their life and create a sense of continuity between the past and the present. Additionally, it encourages creativity and imagination, and it can help people make sense of their current situation and challenges.

Conducting an oral history also can be a bonding experience for the storyteller and listener. Sharing stories from your loved one’s life, especially some that you haven’t told before or in a long time, can make you feel closer. You may even find that you have things or experiences in common with your older family member that you weren’t aware of before.

So how can you conduct an oral history? It’s not difficult, but it involves more than just saying, “Tell me about your life.” Here are a few tips to help ensure a productive, pleasant, and mutually beneficial oral history:

• Keep it short. Sharing memories can be exhausting, so limit each session to less than one hour. Try setting up interviews over several weeks.

• Attend to the person’s feelings and moods. If you go in for a scheduled conversation and your loved one doesn’t feel like talking, don’t force it. Just enjoy the visit and chat informally. If you start the interview and your loved one gets agitated or upset, don’t push them to talk.

• Ask questions driven by genuine curiosity, and remember to be an active listener who responds with empathy and kindness. Don’t judge, challenge, or second-guess them. For instance, if your loved one tells you something shocking they did, don’t say, “Oh my God, that’s awful!” or “How could you do such a thing?” You want them to feel safe sharing their story.

• Don’t ask yes or no questions, and avoid “why” questions, such as “Why did you do that?” which might come across as judgmental or produce an “I don’t know” answer. Instead, ask open-ended questions that begin with “what” or “how,” like “What did that feel like for you?” or “How did you go about doing that?”

• Try asking questions about daily life when someone was young: “Tell me about your childhood bedroom?” or “What did you like to do on rainy days?” These can trigger memories that you may never have heard before and enable you to capture a snapshot of history. Questions such as “What was it like the first time you fell in love?” can also be fun and enlightening.

• Conduct these conversations someplace private and free of distractions. You can record stories using the software on smartphones or your computer. If you’re having the conversation remotely, use Zoom or another software where you can download and share your recording as an mp3.

Before you start, realize that you may not get the perfect narrative. Stories are social, so they often change with the audience or over time. Particularly if someone has dementia or some cognitive impairment, it may be challenging to keep them on one topic or get them to answer a specific question. It’s important not to get frustrated or impatient.

Keep in mind that your loved one’s experiences with illness may be accompanied by a story about why they got sick that may have nothing to do with their medical disease. For instance, they might say, “This cancer is a punishment from God,” or “I never was sick a day in my life until I got divorced.” It’s important to listen to these stories empathetically and try to understand them — whether or not you believe them. They are a key part of your loved one’s reality and can be helpful for them to process pain, illness, and their health care experience.

Questions to Ask Your Loved One Before Getting Started

• Would you mind if I recorded some of your memories/stories about the past?

• Are there topics that you want to talk about?

• Is there a time of day that is better for you?

What You Can Do

• Be interested, curious, and nonjudgmental.

• Don’t push your loved one to talk about anything that is upsetting for them.

• Bring photos, music, or other things with you that are likely to trigger memories.

For More Information

• “How to Do Oral History,” Smithsonian Institution Archives, https://si.edu/3wtdLOb.

• “Narrative Medicine: How Story Telling Relates to Health Care,” Missouri State University, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GiyvzFwWk