

Conference on Aging

Ways to Encourage Anyone to Tell You about Their Life

Compiled by Nell Weatherwax

“The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.” ~ Thich Nhat Hanh

Prepare the Environment

- Limit or remove distractions like TV, devices, noisy people/pets, people who are not into listening
- Attend to your teller’s comfort - warmth, beverage, seating, other needs

Prepare Yourself (to be fully present)

- Set aside more time than you think you will need - exude patience and presence
- Center and ground yourself. Deep slow breath with extended exhale before engaging.
- Remember what you love, respect, appreciate and admire about the person
- Be close - beside them looking at something or across with friendly eye contact eye contact

Engage Active Listening from a Place of Unconditional Positive Regard

- Unconditional positive is a key catalyst for authentic, free flowing, sharing of personal experiences
Minimal encouragers: verbal such as simply murmuring “mm-hm, yes, tell me more”
- Minimal encouragers - non-verbal: warm eye contact, smiling and nodding, staying physically present
- Reflecting emotion - “seems like that was a tough time”
- Reflecting specific words and phrases from a place of acceptance - Sometimes reflecting the exact word or phrase can feel odd but it can be powerful.
- Holding warm silence - breathe slow and allow the silence to become comfortable. The more comfortable you are with silence, the more comfortable they will become.

How to begin - Specific Prompts with Open Ended Questions

Begin with what you know about the person. Note things they bring up and draw out their thoughts on those. Note what is mentioned and plan to bring in pictures, music, objects, scents that continue to inspire more sharing.

Photos with prompt - jog the who, what, where, when with a description followed by a question

- I love this photo of your wedding day - what was your wedding to Dad like?
- Your vacation to the Grand Canyon looks like so much fun - what did it feel like to see it?
- Look how cute I am here with you on Halloween - what kind of kid was I?
- High School yearbooks

Music from their teenage years

- Listen to a song and name the musician - what comes up when you hear that?
- Sing a song you feel sure they know - hymns, carols, children's songs

Objects

- This is the mixing bowl and sieve Grandmother used to make persimmon pudding
- I found this ornament you gave to Mom - what were your Christmases like growing up

Scents

- Enjoy a perfume, scented candle, incense together and ask how it makes them feel, what associations come up
- This almond flavoring reminds me of your amazing coffee cakes. Mom said you won a prize for one once, that had to be a great coffee cake.
(Sometimes a comment is more comfortable than a question and can still lead to sharing)

Stories and moments in your memory

- Start the story as you know it and encourage your teller to continue it from their perspective

Traps and Mistakes to Avoid

- Avoid being too specific with questions - that can feel like interrogation
- It is hard to do but avoid “Do you remember...” It can feel bad to someone struggling with memory
- Bring warm attention but not in a way that puts them “on the spot”
- Avoid pushing too hard for a specific story - agenda can hobble the unfolding
- Watch out for the habit of the quick, pithy exchange - slow down - better to let them muse and meander
- Don’t push for “the point”. In this world, no “point” is needed - just sharing.
- Do wait until later to bring together the pieces into a story with a beginning middle and end.
- To build a story from what you hear, listen for stakes and resolution, but don’t push for it
- Avoid correcting your teller – focus on their experience of the moments from their own perspective
- If a question leads nowhere and inspires no sharing, just move on. Don’t belabor the idea.

Presenting Partner:



Supporting Partners:



Contributing Partners:

