The Power of Telling One’s Story

Sue Cox, BSN, RN-BC

“We know that human beings across time and place have always told stories. These patterned structures for recounting our experience are the form in which we best learn how to get on in the world; they hold our attention as the important lessons come pouring in. Stories also help us frame, contain, and make sense of our experience, they teach us about ourselves and the world we live in. On this most elemental level, we tell stories to survive, even thrive.” Carol LaChapelle

Why tell stories?

Sharing life stories encourages individuals to reflect on and make sense of their own experiences.

Stories can build connections between people and remind us of our shared humanity. Having one’s story truly “heard” can provide hope and wholeness through reflection within a community.

Honoring stories delivers the message that everyone’s story matters.

Creating a safe space for telling one’s stories can enhance and strengthen senior groups, providing whole person care to a potentially isolated and vulnerable population.

What does a Senior Storytelling group look like?

A group meeting once a week to listen to each other’s life stories, and reflect together on lessons learned. A circle is formed, a candle is lit and sharing and listening ensues.

How does it work?

A variety of topics/ themes are chosen (such as grammar school memories, holiday traditions, family vacations, friendship, dreams, fear, first job, etc). Writing prompts are then developed as a tool for generating ideas from which to write a story from one’s own experience. The prompts are given 1-2 weeks prior to gatherings.

At each session, written stories are read out loud first. Careful listening without interruption, and respect, is a requirement for the group. Following the reading of written stories, verbal stories may be shared by the rest of the group.

Subtle, but careful, guidance by the storytelling group leader will assure 1) all stories are honored 2) everyone is allowed opportunity to speak 3) a deeper level of conversation about the topic is possible.

What are other ways to motivate story telling?

1) Use audio stories as prompts.

2) Give participants 2-3 words with instructions to create a brief story incorporating those particular words.

3) Cut a variety of pictures from magazines. Ask participants to choose a picture that speaks to them and then write a brief story related to that picture.

4) Take a well known event, such as the great Chicago fire of 1871, and ask participants to put themselves into the story by writing their experience of that event.

Resources for Storytelling:

LaChappell . *Finding Your Voice Telling Your Stories: 167 Ways to Tell Your Life Stories*. Portland: Marion Street Press, 2008.

StoryCorp [www.storycorp.org/participate/great-questions](http://www.storycorp.org/participate/great-questions)

NPR The Moth Radio Hour <https://themoth.org/radio-hour>

PBS News hour “Brief But spectacular stories” www.pbs.org/newshour/brief/archives?page=2