

Ursula Auclair, MSW:

**Bring the Past into Your Present:
Autobiography and Support Groups for Seniors in New York City**

For the past six years, I have facilitated autobiography groups, couple's and women's groups for people 65 and older. When I first offered these groups as an additional service to the volunteers of a memory study, I was surprised by the enthusiastic response. Although planned to last only 10 weeks, all group members opted to have the groups meet indefinitely, despite issues like transportation and various illnesses. Four groups have now met for six years with no substantial change in membership. This is remarkable (and lucky) for a population whose median age is 84 years.

The focus of the autobiography groups is on developing a sense of self-worth. Together we are creating an atmosphere in which it is possible to express thoughts, feelings and fears. The goal is a non-judgmental and supportive setting, that allows each member to get in touch with long or not so long forgotten events, experiences and feelings and integrate them into "the fabric of their lives" (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). Half way through the 10 sessions, a feeling of kinship and belonging develops, accompanied by the realization that one is not the only one, struggling with the numerous challenges of advancing age. When the groups decided to continue, they had achieved a level of advanced cohesion, risk taking skills and more interpersonal contact.

The process unfolding during each meeting is extremely exciting, invigorating and, unfortunately, difficult to describe. Within the group each individual is seen and heard, sometimes for the first time in years. Each one is acknowledged in a very fundamental way as they are sharing their lives ups and downs.

To be listened to, to be seen and acknowledged is important at every age, but I believe it is mandatory in late life. Often I am in awe, when confronted by the wealth and diversity of the participants' personalities and their experiences. This wealth needs to be expressed and shared more often, not just with friends and family (if they are still around), but with friendly strangers and with the public.

About the participants

You can't teach an old dog new tricks' is only one of the many sayings, that express societies' stereotypical view of older people. It has been accepted as common knowledge, that older people can't change or adjust to new situations has. Although Freud's verdict that people over thirty can't benefit from analysis, because they are too rigid has been softened, older people themselves often believe that it is too late to do something new, to change behavior and habits.

There is, for instance, Olga who herself believed that she was "too shy and uncomfortable with strangers and too old to change" to join a group. I was able to convince her to try it out and she has been coming ever since. At the age of 95, Olga has developed into the gracious, impeccably dressed grand dame of her group, who keeps track of what is going on in group members' lives and who brings in jokes which have older people as subjects (The ability to laugh at the mishaps of old age is a wonderful asset for survival).

There is Jack, who first sat quietly in his chair, describing himself as "a listener", not interested in talking about himself. After years of regular meetings, group members -- now his friends and buddies -- tease him, reminding him of his self-description, when he finishes giving advice to people around him or encouraging someone who is new and too quiet. Jack actively recruits new group members and invites them to join a group, since it has changed his life.

And then we have Ralph, who is considering to finally learn to play the piano, but wonders if he deserves the expense. You might be able to imagine the groups' response!

My Autobiography groups and Support Groups offer Seniors a chance to present themselves anew, to exercise their brains and laughing muscles and to replenish the circle of friends without loss of control over their independence.

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