

Confidentiality in the Structured Life Review

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Confidentiality between the reviewer and the therapeutic listener is one of the most important characteristics of a structured life review. This article defines confidentiality as used in the structured life review setting and explains why confidentiality is so important to a successful outcome. Additionally, we compare the relative need for confidentiality in other reminiscence interventions to the need for confidentiality in a structured life review.

Key Terms: Confidentiality; Structured Life Review; Reminiscence

Confidential is the root word for confidentiality, meaning entrusted with secrets, and suggests personal faith in an open, connected relationship. Confidentiality indicates intimacy and privacy between two people. Genuine confidentiality implies a reliance on another person to keep and protect deep, personal information. Once promised, confidentiality gives importance to what is said and to the person who says it. Facts shared in confidence increase the bond between two people as they discuss intimate information. The act of promising the gift of confidentiality inspires an expectation that is important to a successful structured life review. Confidentiality offers the one who is recalling the past a sense of security and a belief that the story they are sharing right now will remain with only one other person, the therapeutic listener, who is conducting the life review.

Reminiscence and Confidentiality

Although confidentiality is an essential part of a structured life review, it is not a strict requirement for most other reminiscence interventions. This assertion of differences raises the question of why one reminiscence intervention requires such privacy and, apparently, others do not. For example, storytellers participating in an oral history will consider the memories they share as part of the public domain. Their memories are usually about a common, previous event in their lives that contributes to the present day history. The shared memories are the desired product of

the interaction, and contributing those memories is the ultimate purpose of an oral history. Thus, confidentiality in an oral history could be counterproductive and might even cause discrepancies in the final historical report.

Many group reminiscence interventions do not require confidentiality because the memories that unfold in groups are available to all group members, such as in Guided Autobiography. The purpose of the Guided Autobiography group is to write one's thoughts on a specific topic to share with other group members. Because of the disclosing and sharing, there is no need for confidentiality or privacy between group members. Instead, the disclosures actually contribute to acceptance of one member by other members of the group. However, before the participants disclose their thoughts to each other, they probably screen in their own minds what they would like to communicate to the group, often keeping their most personal thoughts to themselves. In a guided autobiography, self-censoring frequently takes place, enabling participants to provide their own confidentiality about the parts of the past they wish to keep private. Since the purpose of a guided autobiography group is dialogue and sharing, group members do not require confidentiality of each other. When people reminisce in groups their memories are more public, but members of a group are expected to protect the confidentiality of the group.

The purpose of narrative reminiscing is to tell one's life story, or a part of one's life story, to another person, the interviewer. Each discrete memory becomes part of a completely new story that is fashioned from the discussion of each person's separate memories. The new account is the result of the on-going dialogue between the interviewer and the reminiscer as they talk about the past and shape the new story. Particular interests of individual interviewers can influence the creation of a new story by affecting the

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dialogue between reminiscer and interviewer. Confidentiality can also bias the story by causing reminiscers to be more selective in the memories they are revealing. Since narrative researchers often gather their memories together to report a cumulative whole, they do not need strict confidentiality. The new story shields the purveyors of the old stories. The assembled memories taken together tell a new story and thus provide anonymity as a type of confidentiality to the participants.

Another form of reminiscing is memoir writing where the purpose of writing a memoir is to leave one's life story behind for others to enjoy. The need to leave a legacy for one's family often prompts the desire to create a visible reminder of one's life in the form of a book, a video tape, or a memoir. And of course today it is getting easier and easier to assemble one's personal story on a computer and self-publish it, or hire a memoirist to do it for you and with you. With a memoirist one gets to share a story resulting in more unexpected therapeutic outcomes. Because the individuals chose to share their life story with the intent of passing it down to others, there is less need for confidentiality. An experienced memoirist revises the memoir many times to protect the reminiscer from disclosing sensitive life issues that would be awkward if they were a part of the final product. Thus, the type of reminiscing one does influences the need for confidentiality

The previously described reminiscing interventions do not necessarily require confidentiality. Confidentiality might actually compromise the outcomes of some methods such as oral history. Both guided autobiography and memoir writing intend to make their life stories public. In group projects, most of the memories revealed are public by default, shared by multiple participants in the groups, and generally do not require privacy. Confidentiality of sorts would occur, in effect, if the participants censored themselves before speaking to the group.

Life Review and Confidentiality

By design, the structured life review (Haight & Haight, 2007) requires confidentiality as part of its process. Initially we created the structured life review for research purposes as an intervention to increase the well-being of older people while decreasing their depression. Consequently, many of the life review's characteristics, such as structure (reviewing the entire life span from childhood to the present), arose from the need to have similar interventions for all participants. The value of having such a defined intervention is that the research over time reveals the parts of the intervention that make the process therapeutic. Accordingly, the listener guides reviewers to recall and evaluate each of their developmental phases and life stages. For example, reviewers cannot avoid talking about childhood by focusing on adulthood. Listeners ask reviewers to evaluate all phases of their lives. (Haight &

Dias, 1992) To agree to do this, in fact, reviewers must feel safe in the life review. They must trust the listener to safeguard the intimate details of their lives. They need to establish a bond between them. The promise of upfront confidentiality creates this trust and bond.

Most reminiscence interventions have a process (the way we conduct the intervention) and a product (the story). In a structured life review, the purpose of the process is to increase well-being and satisfaction with the way one has lived one's life. The reviewer achieves these purposes through the structured process, guided by a form based on Erikson's stages of development known as the LREF (Life Review and Experiencing Form). The listener encourages reviewers to recall their whole life span, while examining their feelings connected to the memories they are disclosing. The memories should be personal, about themselves. To accomplish this, reviewers should feel a sense of safety and security while they bond with the listener, knowing the listener will protect their memories, regardless of the content. Confidentiality is fundamental to the healing that takes place in a structured life review. The method of conducting a structured life review is more important to healing (the therapeutic outcomes) than the story told compared to other reminiscence interventions where the story is more significant than the process.

People choose to participate in a life review for many reasons, including being lonely, just wanting to talk, or having a weekly visitor. Others might want to take part because their neighbor did a life review and it sounds like fun, or because they are curious about what happens. Though the listener explains the process to the reviewers and the reviewers read the questions on the guidance sheets (LREF), most potential reviewers do not realize how personal the process may become. In the beginning, reviewers never expect to reveal private personal matters that are resting somewhere in their subconscious. However as they talk about themselves in a safe setting, one old memory may remind them of another and they may disclose many lifetime secrets. It is not unusual to hear a reviewer say, "I've never told that to anyone else before." So regardless of the reasons for participating in a life review, reviewers often need the implied and expressed sense of protection of confidentiality to assure themselves that such spontaneous disclosures will not be shared with others.

During the very first meeting of a structured life review intervention, the therapeutic listener should raise the topic of confidentiality and explain that the confidential relationship is a part of the process of a structured life review. Both the listener and the reviewer need to sign a confidentiality agreement. This agreement provides reviewers with a clear and convincing assurance in the anonymity of the process and encourages them to feel safe when telling their story (The only exception to the confidentiality rule is the creation of a life storybook for those who have Alzheimer's disease).

Confidentiality not only protects the life reviewer, it encourages them as well. Because reviewers feel safe, they are more open about their lives and freer to recall the past. The confidentiality agreement removes any existing anxiety that might arise when reviewers talk about distressing life events, incidents that they may have been suppressing and struggling with their whole lives. Knowing that only one interested unique person is listening encourages reviewers to talk more freely. Talking with the therapeutic listener shares the burden and frees the reviewer a little more each time. The therapeutic listener teaches reviewers to look at their problems in different ways, enabling reviewers to change their mental story into one that is more acceptable to them. Repetition of a tiresome subject, and acceptance by the therapeutic listener, often instigates acceptance of self. Confidentiality enables the healing process of life review by providing a safe haven in which these processes can take place.

Despite the confidential relationship established between the reviewer and the listener, there are times when the reviewer decides not to talk about a past event, person, or topic. The therapeutic listener must respect this decision. The reviewer basically controls the structured life review. The listener might probe a bit, but if the reviewer deflects the probe, the listener should move on, even though it might be more therapeutic for the reviewer to discuss this secret or hidden thought. When the reviewer leaves the past undisturbed because the reviewer does not want to talk about a particular event, despite the confidential agreement, then the listener needs to follow suit. An insightful listener usually recognizes the individual who does not want to share a memory and knows that the intervention will not be as therapeutic without full disclosure. Nevertheless, the process must progress as the reviewer chooses to progress. Life review has some limitations and this is one of them. Confidentiality encourages full disclosure but not always successfully.

Conclusions

Many reminiscence methods do not require an atmosphere or relationship of confidentiality. They do entail the sharing of memories. Most participants in reminiscing groups openly and freely share their memories with other

group members, not even thinking about confidentiality. Memories shared in groups become public as group members reveal them. In many reminiscence groups, confidentiality might actually interfere with the sharing of memories.

In contrast, confidentiality is essential to the success of a structured life review. Confidentiality provides the sense of privacy and trust that encourages candor. This sense of privacy allows reviewers to recall the past freely and to examine the life they have lived thoroughly. The aura of privacy provides both parties with feelings of stability and trust and contributes to the bonding between the two individuals participating in a structured life review. With an upfront declaration of confidentiality, participants within a dialogue feel freer to share their thoughts about personal, private past events. Sharing such events, while being accepted by the listener, encourages reviewers to accept themselves. Confidentiality sets the stage for the life review to be most therapeutic.

The protocol for a structured life review requires a secluded setting that guarantees reviewers the coveted privacy necessary for them to explore their feelings and share their thoughts. The listener guarantees such discretion when the listener and the reviewer sign a consent sheet at the beginning of the life review process. Because of this prior understanding of confidentiality, the reviewer in a life review often feels comfortable and able to disclose sensitive information. Confidentiality may be one part of the process that assures a deeper and more honest recall of the past. The way we access memories, the process, may influence the outcomes we gain. Thus, the creation of confidentiality provides a sheltered and secure environment in which reviewers can explore their lives more fully and deal with past difficult issues.

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