

Why Life Story Books Should Be Part of Every Nursing Home Admission

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Moving into a nursing home is a major life transition that often leads to increased emotional stress, loss of identity, and increased mortality risk. Life Story Books (LSBs) provide a person-centered approach that help residents maintain identity, foster social connections, and support emotional and cognitive well-being. This paper reviews the process of creating LSBs and highlights their multiple benefits. LSBs enhance resident well-being by promoting reminiscence, increasing self-esteem, and reducing depressive symptoms. They provide cognitive stimulation and emotional engagement, help preserve memory function, and strengthen communication between residents, staff, and families. LSBs also improve continuity of care by offering staff deeper insights into each resident's history and preferences, enabling more personalized and compassionate caregiving. Furthermore, they encourage family involvement and align with therapeutic practices such as reminiscence and life review, which have been shown to improve mood and quality of life in older adults. Incorporating LSBs into the nursing home admission process offers a simple yet powerful way to promote dignity, connection, and meaningful engagement, ultimately enhancing quality of care and quality of life for residents with and without dementia.

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Moving into a nursing home is a significant life event for most older adults, and it often comes with many challenges. Research shows that between 50% and 60% of new residents may pass away within the first year, underscoring the difficulty of this transition (Flacker & Kiely, 2003; Hicks et al., 2014). This high risk is often due to a combination of physical and emotional stress, pre-existing health conditions, and the challenge of adjusting to an unfamiliar environment. The first six months are particularly critical, as mortality rates tend to be even higher during this period (Polacsek & Woolford, 2022). Navigating the complexities of nursing home care can be tough, especially with a mix of residents—some living with dementia and others without cognitive impairments. Finding solutions that meet everyone's needs is challenging.

That's where life story books (LSBs) come in. LSBs offer a personalized approach to supporting residents both with and without dementia, helping them stay connected to their past and maintain their sense of identity. By making the transition smoother and more comforting, LSBs enhance the well-being of all residents, making them a

valuable tool for creating a supportive and welcoming environment.

What are Life Story Books?

LSBs are a form of reminiscence work where reflecting on a person's past experiences results in a personalized life story book. These books may resemble scrapbooks, filled with memories, important moments, and personal stories captured through photos, written accounts, and keepsakes. They preserve the key events and highlights that shape who someone is.

The beauty of LSBs lies not only in the final product but in the process of creating them. As the person reflects on their past—important events, relationships, and experiences—these memories are shaped into a meaningful narrative. This journey of reminiscing serves as a valuable tool for the person and helps to maintain a sense of identity and personal continuity.

For older adults, especially those moving into nursing homes, LSBs can provide great comfort. They help residents, whether they have dementia or not, stay connected to their personal history, offering familiarity and reassurance during a time of transition.

But LSBs aren't just about preserving memories; they also help staff get to know the person they're caring for. By understanding a resident's history, preferences, and personality, staff can offer more personalized and compassionate care. These books often spark meaningful conversations, allowing staff and residents to connect on a deeper level. In the end, LSBs are simple yet powerful tools that enrich the lives of older adults, ensuring their stories are shared, their preferences respected, and their identities honored.

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I am sincerely grateful to the residents and staff who shared their stories in earlier research; their voices continue to inspire this work.

How Can Life Story Books Be Created?

Creating an LSB is a meaningful, often collaborative process that captures the essence of someone's life through their memories and experiences. It begins with in-depth, heart-to-heart conversations with the person whose story is being told. These discussions cover key aspects of their life, such as childhood memories, important relationships, career highlights, and personal milestones they find significant. Audio recording these conversations is key to ensuring accuracy, as it captures the storyteller's exact words, minimizing misinterpretation, and provides an opportunity to revisit the conversation later to catch details that might have been missed. This also allows for better engagement during the conversation, without the distraction of taking extensive notes.

Once conversations have been recorded, gathering photos, letters, and keepsakes helps bring their history to life. These items often spark additional stories, adding richness and context to the life story being told. To protect the storyteller's valuable items, it's best to copy, scan, or photograph them, rather than removing them from their possession.

In cases where no personal photos are available, images may be found online to complement their narrative. For example, one person shared a story about driving a taxicab in Texas in the 1950s. A photo of the cab company from that era was found and included with his story. Another time, a photo of a woman's high school cheerleading team from the 1940s was found through a quick Google search. It perfectly complemented her story. The storytellers were thrilled with these additions, because they added an extra layer of connection and authenticity to their memories.

After collecting all stories and materials, the next step is to organize the LSB. The book can be structured in a way that makes the most sense to the person whose story is being told. One option is to arrange it chronologically, starting from their earliest memories and moving through the different stages of their life. Another approach is to organize it by themes, like "Family," "Travel," or "Career," depending on which aspects of their life they find most meaningful. This way, the book truly reflects their unique journey.

A key part of the process is deciding how to arrange the photos alongside the text. Adding captions to the photos and labeling keepsakes—ideally with input from the storyteller—makes a huge difference. These little details help explain and bring the story to life. We found that using an expandable scrapbook is really practical because it allows for adding extra pages, stories, and memorabilia as new memories are created over time. This way, the book can continue to grow and evolve as the person's story unfolds (Chrisman, 2019; Gridley et al., 2016).

Once the design is complete, the next step is to review and fine-tune the book. It is important to review the book with the storyteller to make sure everything is accurate and that the story reflects how they want it to be told. The

storyteller always has the final say on what gets included or left out (McKeown et al., 2015). After everything is finalized, the LSB creator can print the book and place it in their album. In addition, a digital version can be created, which makes it easy to share with friends and family online.

For people living with dementia, creating an LSB should ideally be a personal process, where they choose their own pictures, keepsakes, and words to tell their story in a way that feels meaningful to them. It's a powerful way for them to stay connected to their memories and sense of identity. However, because of the effects of dementia, it can sometimes be difficult to recall events or connect different memories. In these cases, a bit more flexibility is needed, and having a family or staff member step in to help can be very beneficial. They can assist in filling in the gaps while still respecting the voice and choices of the person with dementia, ensuring the book remains a true reflection of their life and experiences.

The goal of an LSB is to create a rich, personal account that truly reflects who the person is. It should be a living document, meaning it can be continually updated and evolve as the person's life unfolds (Gridley et al., 2018). New memories, experiences, and stories can always be added, ensuring it remains an authentic reflection of the person's journey. This keeps the book up-to-date and continues to capture important moments, allowing the person, their loved ones, and staff to stay connected with their evolving life story. Incorporating LSBs into nursing homes can have a profound impact on residents' emotional, cognitive, and social well-being. Now, let's explore some of the specific benefits LSBs can bring, supported by research.

Enhancing Resident Well-being

LSBs provide a tangible connection to residents' pasts, helping them maintain a sense of identity and continuity during times of transition, such as moving into a nursing home or receiving a dementia diagnosis (Elfrink et al., 2018). These moments can trigger feelings of loss, anxiety, and depression, but reminiscing through an LSB can offer psychological comfort.

One nursing home resident (90-year-old White woman) shared, "I've enjoyed thinking about 'em (memories). These visits have made me feel good because it's made me think about things that I'd forgotten, nice memories." This shows how reminiscing can provide emotional comfort, helping residents reconnect with their identity, which is essential during major life transitions like moving into a nursing home.

Similarly, another resident (64-year-old Black woman) remarked, "I have enjoyed talking with you. I remembered I still have lots of living left to do. There's some things I still want to do. I may write a book about me." Her reflection on having "lots of living left to do" illustrates how LSBs can boost self-esteem by helping residents feel empowered and purposeful, enhancing their overall well-being.

LSBs help residents reconnect with their life experiences, providing a much-needed sense of purpose and continuity. In addition to emotional comfort, recalling and documenting achievements and important relationships boosts self-esteem and confidence. It helps residents reflect on their accomplishments and the meaningful connections they've built, which provides a sense of purpose and satisfaction (Subramaniam et al., 2014). These combined effects create an overall sense of well-being for residents.

Cognitive and Emotional Benefits

LSBs provide significant cognitive and emotional stimulation for residents, regardless of whether they have dementia. For those with dementia, these books are particularly valuable because they help preserve personal memories, which becomes increasingly crucial as memory loss progresses (Grøndahl et al., 2017). Engaging with these books encourages residents to recall and share their experiences, which can help preserve cognitive function by keeping their minds active and engaged (Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012). Reflecting on positive memories boosts mood, provides comfort, and reduces anxiety and depression (Huang et al., 2015).

As one resident shared, "It was very shocking that I could come up with so much. I can't believe I can remember so much" (73-year-old Black woman with Parkinson's). She expressed surprise at her ability to remember so much, showing the cognitive engagement LSBs promote.

Even for residents with memory impairments, LSBs offer meaningful cognitive stimulation. The process of creating an LSB encourages residents to tap into their memories, which can help with memory retention and recall (Huang et al., 2015). By sharing and revisiting their life stories, residents often reconnect with long-forgotten memories, which can bring a sense of joy and accomplishment. Engaging regularly with these personal histories not only brings comfort but also supports cognitive health, potentially slowing down the onset of cognitive decline (Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012).

One resident said, "I'd lay awake at night thinking of things I couldn't remember" (80-year-old White woman). This quote further emphasizes how the process of creating and interacting with LSBs can engage memory and cognition, supporting the research about delaying cognitive decline and boosting emotional well-being.

LSBs not only support cognitive function but also provide emotional benefits, helping to boost mood, reduce anxiety, and offer a comforting sense of continuity and personal history. These combined cognitive and emotional benefits contribute to an overall improved quality of life for residents.

Strengthening Social Connections and Communication

LSBs play a vital role in fostering meaningful connections among residents, staff, and visitors in nursing

homes. Acting as conversation starters, these books provide rich material for breaking the ice and building rapport (Grøndahl et al., 2017). For example, one staff member shared that a resident, who had been withdrawn for two years—never leaving her room, eating with others, or getting dressed—started getting dressed, eating in the dining room, and participating in outings with others after creating her LSB. Also, another resident even took her LSB on outings, proudly sharing it with others, highlighting how LSBs promote social participation and help foster a sense of belonging.

LSBs are especially helpful in enhancing communication, particularly for those whose verbal skills are declining. One resident (73-year-old Black woman) with Parkinson's, who had difficulty speaking, was grateful for the opportunity to share her story, saying, "Thank you for taking the time to try and understand me."

By providing a visual and narrative aid, LSBs help staff and family members better engage with residents, especially those with dementia (Gridley et al., 2018). This deepens bonds between residents and staff, promoting empathy and understanding while building emotional connections (Haight & Haight, 2007).

In addition, LSBs give staff deeper insights into each resident's preferences, history, and personality, enabling more personalized care. Understanding a resident's background allows staff to create a familiar, supportive environment that enhances overall care (Elfrink et al., 2018).

By facilitating communication and building community, LSBs not only strengthen social connections but also help residents feel more engaged and valued in their environment. As one 74-year-old Hispanic woman resident said, "I'm glad to share my story with someone else." Through shared stories and memories, LSBs foster a sense of belonging and emotional connection with others.

Enhancing Personalized Care and Continuity

LSBs play an integral role in ensuring continuity of care, particularly during transitions between care settings or staff. They serve as a consistent reference, providing new staff with deep insights into a resident's background, preferences, and significant life events. This knowledge helps staff tailor their approach to meet the unique needs of each resident, ensuring that the individual's history and identity are respected and incorporated into daily care (Callahan et al., 2012; Doran et al., 2019; Grøndahl et al., 2017).

By fostering more personalized care, LSBs help create a caregiving environment that prioritizes respect, individuality, and emotional connection. When staff understand a resident's past, they can approach care with greater empathy, resulting in a more compassionate and supportive environment (Thach & Wiener, 2018). This deeper understanding strengthens relationships between staff and residents, making caregiving more meaningful for both parties.

For instance, one resident expressed how using an LSB motivated her to become more involved in her community: "I think I started believing in myself that I can do things; that I can participate. I'm going to start going on the outings" (76-year-old White woman). This example highlights how LSBs can empower residents to engage more actively in their surroundings, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being.

By focusing on each resident's personal history and preferences, LSBs provide a strong foundation for compassionate and effective care, helping create a supportive environment that fosters respect, empathy, and emotional connection between residents and staff.

Facilitating Family Involvement

LSBs can provide a unique opportunity to engage family members in the care of their loved ones, encouraging their participation not only during the admissions process but also throughout ongoing care. By involving families in creating the LSB, they can contribute stories, memories, and photos, which strengthens bonds and provides comfort for both the residents and their loved ones (Roberts, 2018). This collaborative effort can deepen family connections while also offering emotional support to residents during the transition to a nursing home.

LSBs not only engage residents in meaningful ways but also preserve family history. One resident reflected, "After my Mom and Dad died, I thought I wished they would have told me more about their lives. This book will be a way that I can let my kids know a little about my life" (83-year-old White man). This highlights how LSBs strengthen connections between residents and their loved ones, while capturing personal histories that create lasting memories for future generations (Wren, 2016). By preserving these stories, LSBs offer both present engagement and a lasting family legacy.

Promoting Therapeutic Benefits

The process of creating and reflecting on LSBs aligns closely with life review and reminiscence therapies, both of which have been shown to reduce depressive symptoms, improve autobiographical memory, and enhance the overall well-being of older adults (McKeown et al., 2010; Westerhof et al., 2010). Life review encourages individuals to reflect on their past experiences, helping them process and make sense of their life stories. This process can bring psychological relief and emotional comfort, as seen in one resident's reflection: "Reviewing my life took some things that I had pushed down and not dealt with in a while. Reviewing my life brought up a lot of good memories too" (78-year-old Black woman). Another resident shared, "I often think of my life and say; did I do the right thing? Could I have done it better or differently? From what I see, I did everything in the right manner that I should have done. There was nothing I could've done differently" (89-year-old White woman).

These examples show how life review and reminiscence, facilitated by LSBs, can bring emotional relief and closure. In addition to the emotional benefits, LSBs serve as a key tool in reminiscence, which has been shown to improve mood, increase socialization, and offer other psychological benefits that ultimately contribute to a higher quality of life for older adults (Huang et al., 2015).

For instance, a resident (76-year-old Black woman) remarked, "I can remember some of the good things and the bad things. I laugh about it. Now that I've survived it, it's funny." Another resident (76-year-old Black woman) reflected, "I loved it (sharing my stories). It was something to bring my mind from way back to now." These quotes highlight the psychological benefits of reminiscing, such as improving mood and providing a sense of accomplishment.

LSBs provide a range of benefits that help reduce behavioral issues, foster deeper engagement, and enhance the overall quality of care (Huang et al., 2015). By reconnecting residents with their personal history, LSBs offer a comforting link to familiar memories, helping to ease anxiety and agitation, which are common challenges for those with dementia.

Research shows that activities like creating LSBs can also improve social engagement and reduce challenging behaviors (Subramaniam & Woods, 2012). This kind of interaction stimulates cognitive function and gives residents a sense of continuity, which can lessen confusion and disorientation.

But the benefits of LSBs aren't just cognitive—they also offer significant emotional support. By encouraging positive memories and providing a sense of purpose, LSBs can boost mood, increase self-esteem, and reduce feelings of loneliness or isolation. Sharing their stories helps residents feel more connected and valued, bringing comfort and joy. In this way, LSBs not only keep the mind active but also make the caregiving experience more meaningful, making them a valuable tool in dementia care.

In Conclusion

Using LSBs as part of the nursing home admission process is a great way to build deeper, more meaningful connections with residents. By encouraging them to share their personal stories, LSBs help residents keep a strong sense of who they are, making them feel more understood as they settle into their new home. These books do more than just collect memories—they help staff and residents build closer relationships, making the nursing home experience more personal and caring.

For the staff, LSBs give a special window into each resident's background, helping them offer more compassionate and tailored care. It shifts caregiving from just meeting basic needs to really understanding the person, which boosts both the emotional and cognitive well-being of the residents. Plus, it encourages more empathy and stronger bonds between staff and residents.

Making LSBs a regular part of the admission process can really enhance the overall environment in nursing

homes. They can create a more connected, supportive community where residents feel respected, listened to, and truly cared for. By fostering this kind of environment, nursing homes can significantly improve residents' quality of life, helping them feel more at home.

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