# Drawing Out Our Stories

## A Guidebook for Facilitating Arts-based Life Review Therapy Groups with Elderly Adults

Cheryl Horn – St. Stephen's College

### What is life review therapy, and how does it differ from other forms of reminiscence?

Simple Reminiscence (SR) - Autobiographic story telling that often happens spontaneously with family and friends. It is encouraged in many seniors' assisted living homes, and is usually centred around specific themes, such as popular games played when the elderly were children, holiday celebrations, and favorite old recipes.

Add to SR: structured order, an expectation that people will review all developmental stages

Structured Life Review (SLR) – Much more structured than simple reminiscence, SLR focuses on integrating both positive and negative life events into a coherent and meaningful life narrative. SLR is suitable for people experiencing mild psychological distress.

Add to SLR: a psychotherapeutic theoretical focus, e.g.: narrative therapy, cognitive therapy

Life Review Therapy (LRT) - Adds the aim of diminishing reminiscence functions that are linked to depression and anxiety. LRT has been shown to produce substantial improvements on the wellbeing of reviewers, particularly in the reduction of depression, and has come to be considered an evidence-based treatment for depression in older adults. (Scogin, Welsh, Hanson, Stump and Coates, 2005)

For more details on these distinctions see Webster, Bohlmeijer & Westerhof, 2010, p. 550-552.

### The project:

For my capstone project, I have produced a guidebook for facilitating art-based, life review therapy groups (with narrative therapy underpinnings) for community-dwelling older adults experiencing a depressive disorder. The groups will be limited to a maximum of six participants, who will meet for eight weeks. Group participants will begin their life review focusing on their early childhood years, moving chronologically through their lives as the weeks progress. Each week focuses on a new psychosocial developmental stage, drawing primarily upon the work of Erik Erikson, and Gene Cohen. Group members will engage in the life review therapy in a creative way – via mixed-media art journaling, which provides structure while still allowing great freedom in the artmaking processes and materials used. At the end of the eight weeks, they will have created a Lifebook that documents, and potentially re-authors, their story thus far. It will also include some hopes for their future years.

In Canada, the growth rate of the population over the age of 65 is approximately four times the growth rate of the population as a whole.
Statistics Canada (2015)

**Did you know?**

Depression is the most common mental health issue faced by older adults, and it is often undetected or undertreated due to the incorrect belief that depression is an inevitable consequence of aging.
(Cappeliez, 2015; CCSMH.ca, 2005)

Creativity is good for you! A study of older persons (aged 65+) involved in creative arts programs found that participants had better health after one year, had fewer doctor visits, used fewer medications, felt less depressed, had higher morale and were more socially active than older persons in control groups not participating in creative arts. (Cohen, 2005, p. 178)

Thinking positively about getting older extends one's life by seven-and-one half years, which is more than the longevity gained from low blood pressure or low cholesterol or by maintaining a healthy weight, abstaining from smoking and exercising regularly. (Levy, Slade, Kunkel & Kasl, 2002)

### My inspiration

The desire to work on this project came from the close relationship I was privileged to have with my grandparents. The were dynamic, resilient people who were also great storytellers; various childhood escapades, living in Europe during WWII, and emigrating to Canada to start a new life made for some very interesting tales for me to grow up on. As they aged, I was troubled by the way society so easily dismissed them. It is my desire to work with older adults in a way that promotes hope and dignity.

### Benefits of adding art therapy into the mix with LRT:

- Art-making is rewarding. It feels good to express feelings artistically even when the feelings expressed are not enjoyable. Making art in a group setting also creates a sense of ritual that provides psychological safety and promotes interpersonal emotional risk taking. (Moon, 2016, p. 62)
- The creation of art can aid in externalizing conversations. "Having clients draw their problem is a very dramatic way to separate the problem from their lives. It is externalization in the most literal sense." (Carlson, 1997, p. 277)
- Art journaling with mixed media and collage is an accessible artistic endeavour; people of all artistic skill levels can enjoy great rewards using this method of expression. Group members will be able to achieve a sense of mastery and success in their artistic work, which can lead to increased confidence and a willingness to take risks. Increasing one's sense of mastery can also directly promote physical health. (Cohen, 2005, p. 179)

### Research Highlights

Offering LRT in groups is effective - A group of researchers in the Netherlands have been doing extensive research into offering LRT in a group format; they suggest that the social comparison found in groups increases the effectiveness of the life review therapy, especially in treating depression.
(e.g., Korte, Drossaert, Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2013; Maercker & Bachem, 2013).

Brief LRT groups are effective - Studies of interventions using only 6 sessions of LRT have produced positive results comparable with traditional interventions that normally have as many as 46 sessions. (Watt and Cappeliez, 2000)

Arts-based LRT is just emerging – Most LRT interventions are oral, but researchers are starting to consider the addition of creative expression stating, "Non-verbal and creative expression may be an important approach in reminiscence, but this approach has not been explored in any depth." (Bohlmeijer et al. 2005, p. 303).

Narrative therapy is proposed for use in LRT -
(e.g. Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014; Korte, Bohlmeijer, Cappeliez, Smit & Westerhof, 2012)
Narrative therapy is an effective treatment for depression in older adults. (Madigan, 2019, p.5-8, 22-26 )

### Research Highlights, Continued…

Developmental theories continue to evolve - Recent work in this area has included much more focus on the nuances in different stages of mature adulthood. Cohen has proposed a series of four dynamic stages for mature adulthood: midlife reevaluation (40s - late 50s), liberation (late 50s - 70s), summing up (late 60s - 80s), and encore (late 70's - end of life). He states that older adulthood is not a time of stasis or decline, but rather a time of growth, learning and deep satisfactions. (Cohen, 2005, p. 52-54)

### Moving forward:

I would like to begin offering arts-based LRT groups. I am interested in expanding the plan to include various artistic media (e.g., textiles and fusible web). Finally, I plan to track results with tools such as the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS), and hope to publish the results to promote the usefulness of this intervention.