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An Introduction to Cognitive Activities

Is cognitive activity important for hardy aging? Growing numbers of researchers say, "Yes!" In my own investigations with Dr. Mindy Baker and others, we have reported benefits of memory activities for persons with and without dementia (Seifert & Baker, 1998; Seifert & Baker, 2002). **My personal experiences in eldercare and my two decades as a memory researcher merge as I build successful activities for eldercare and dementia care. I use principles from science to create supportive activities for elders.** In Parts I and II of this book, I give detailed explanations and provide materials for some of the most successful cognitive tasks that I've used recently. In Part III of this book, I describe the history of my research (Chapter 5), and Dr. Baker and I discuss a specific study of memory benefits from repetition in Alzheimer-type dementia (Chapter 6).

Cognitive Activities: Storytelling as a Foundation

In my first book, *Chasing Dragonflies: Life and Care in Aging*, I explained many aspects of the psychology of aging (Seifert, 2007). That book also included some of the cognitive activities that I have

investigated. It is through my training in cognitive psychology and my work designing and leading activities in eldercare that **I've found storytelling to be invaluable. It builds bridges between participants by providing a shared experience through which they can relate to each other.** When we find ways of connecting with others through positive events, life can take on new meaning.

In his description of aging through adulthood, well-known developmental theorist Erik Erikson (1980) called the later years of life an era for evaluating 'integrity versus despair'. During this important time, a person might conclude that life has been worthwhile—or not. Life review and reflection become a very important part of this evaluation (Staudinger, 2001; McMahan & Rhudnick, 1964). As Bien (2005) has pointed out, 'people know through narrative' (paraphrase, pp. 96-97). We hear stories. We tell stories. Our lives *are* stories.

Scholars analyze literature and religious texts to look for common forms, themes, and type scenes. These devices help them to understand authors, their audiences, and entire cultures (Levine, 2001). What literary scholars know about people is that **we create stories about our lives, the lives of others, and about life's meaning. We tell and retell these stories, and they become the realities we enact.** Our stories help us

to process information and reflect about life. Those personal stories also tell the people around us about our beliefs, tragedies, and dreams. Throughout history, people have analyzed narratives, poems, plays, and stories in order to understand the lives of others. By reading the stories of others, we can also learn more about ourselves.

Designing and leading activities in eldercare, I have found that many elders—with and without dementia—like to reflect through storytelling. Someone once said, "Everyone enjoys a good story!" If the story is personally relevant and part of a session in which meaningful life reflection and social interactions take place, then this can be especially true. The story becomes an event, and that event can bring great joy to the participants.

Building Activities around Stories

To use storytelling and discussion in cognitive tasks for elders, *I begin by selecting a story with a particular group of seniors in mind.* During the preparation phase—while I am trying to find a suitable poem, story, essay, or play—I ask myself the following questions:

- 1) Whose personalities and interests fit this story?

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- 2) Will the story work well if I read it aloud to a group?
- 3) What voice works best for me as the storyteller (reading from the "I/me-voice" or a "They/them-voice")?
- 4) To what size group do I want to read this story (e.g., 1, 15, or 50 people)?
- 5) How long will this session be (20 minutes with one story and some questions, or an hour-long party with a theme and one or more related stories)?
- 6) Do I have a specific set of questions to use in an after-story discussion?
- 7) Are the after-story questions related to the story and its theme?
- 8) Are the after-story questions relevant to the life experiences of people in the story-discussion group?
- 9) Can I find ancillaries (props like a flower, a large photo of a butterfly, a guest speaker, a child, or a pet) to "set the stage" for the story and discussion?
- 10) Can I use this story to build a "themed" activity (e.g., a luau, an ice cream social,

a coffee klatch/club, a "spa day" with beauty treatments & manicures, a men's prayer group, a fly-fishing slide-show, a movie night, a quilt exhibit, a spelling bee, a sports night with the latest Wii™ games, etc.)?

- 11) Will this story and reflection time be uplifting for participants?

Those questions provide guideposts for planning a storytelling and reflection session.

Once I've found a story that will be of interest to elders for whom I provide care, I practice reading it aloud in front of a mirror. This might sound a bit silly, but it can help a storyteller to see his/her facial expressions. I try to notice the messages that I am communicating with verbal and non-verbal behaviors (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, posture). Am I at ease? Is my posture relaxed, but not sloppy? Are my facial expressions consistent with the events in the story that I am reading? These are just some of the preparations I make for a storytelling activity.

Among other tasks are: (1) Remembering to address participants by their preferred names, and (2) including some direct questions [like: "(Person's name), do you like roses?"]. These personal touches are important, because they show that I care about the

participants, and they help to orient lower-functioning persons to the activity.

I use a voice that is loud enough, not too high-pitched, and in language that is simple enough to be understood by persons with and without dementia and/or hearing impairments. I slow my speaking rate slightly, in order to help participants with dementia *toward* better speech comprehension. In my recent book about the psychology of aging, I have mentioned details about aging, hearing, and speech recognition (Seifert, 2007). Because the senses change with age, it's important to give special consideration to them when planning an activity session for elders.

I try to build a storytelling session that has meaning, a theme, fun, and props. Bringing visual aids and memory cues into the storytelling environment can be very helpful. It might increase participants' enjoyment and understanding of the session. A scholar and philosopher, Andrew Clark (1997) has described ways that humans interact with their surroundings. In some respects, we *become* our environment. He has cited the instance of an individual with Alzheimer's disease (AD). As the disease progresses, a person requires more and more assistance from the environment in order to function. A life event that would have been remembered spontaneously in previous years is now



Note: I do *not* utilize this poem about laundry when reading to participants who have *mild-to-moderate dementia* of the Alzheimer-type. In my personal experience working with persons with *mild* DAT: I find that many such folks become upset about laundry and household management issues—not recognizing the clothes in their closets; having the impression that they have lost clothes; or feeling as if they are not competent when they need help doing laundry. In my view, this poem about doing laundry is best suited to high-functioning participants (who can enjoy its humor).

Also, about Question #10, which follows the poem, it's an *equivoque*: using the word "blues" to refer to a color in the laundry (like the blue denim jeans) and to an emotion (like feeling sad, because one has so much laundry to do).

The Wash-and-Dry Blues

Ruby socks with sparkles,
Stowed away,
In a load of white laundry.

A dollar bill in his jeans,
Washed and dried,
Till it can't be recognized.

Ironed shirts with starch:
They return wrinkled,
Again and again...
Ten-thousand times, again.

The clogged washer filter,
A fuzz ball stuck inside.
Wash-and-dry blues,
There's no time to lose.

Stuck on high heat,
The denim jeans will shrink.
A load of whites cannot be found,
Because they've all turned pink!

Discussion Questions

1. This poem was about doing laundry. One event in the rhyme involves a red sock being stuck in a load of white laundry. Has this ever happened to you?

2. The poem mentioned a dollar bill that went through the wash. Have you ever left something in your pocket and found that it went through the laundry?

3. What happens to clothes when they are left in the dryer too long?

4. Have you ever lost a sock in the dryer and wondered where it went? [This might lead to a comical discussion about all the myths regarding where lost socks go when they disappear from the dryer.]

5. Do you remember the days when we had to add starch to shirts in order to keep the wrinkles away?

6. Some folks have a special day of the week that they set aside for laundry. Have you ever done this? [If so,] On what day of the week do you prefer to wash your laundry?

7. Why would someone write a poem about doing laundry? Does it seem funny to do that?

8. Nowadays, many wives and husbands share household chores, like laundry. Do you think that children should help their parents with laundry? Should children do their own laundry? [If so, at what age is a child old enough to do laundry?]

9. With today's modern technology, washers and dryers are very complicated. They have many different cycles and temperatures. Do you think today's washers and dryers are better or worse than the ones we used to use? [Why?]

10. The title of this poem is comical. Are there any English teachers in our group who can name the type of literary device that is used in the poem's title? [Repeat the title aloud.]

