

Core stories as identity preservers for older adults with dementia

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Background: People with dementia have difficulties in performing short-term memory tasks while their long-term memory is preserved relatively well, even in moderate and advanced stages of the illness. Life stories, therefore, have a double significance for older people with dementia. They provide them with a sense of capability and success and at the same time, they promote opportunities to present their narrative identities. This step helps them to reconstruct their self-identity in order to better cope with the challenges of dementia.

Methods: A qualitative research examined the narrative identity construction process of older adults with dementia. Three creative reminiscence groups of older adults with mild dementia took part in different day care centers in Israel. Each group met with the researcher for 10 weekly 45-minute sessions. Life stories of 21 people with mild dementia were recorded and analyzed. The data analysis included literary methodology and content analysis.

Findings: Four categories of narrative identities were found: Being a part of the big story; the high achievers and the successful; the different and special; and life in the shadow of trauma. It was also found that the stories the participants tended to repeat on were those stories that clustered a few narrative identities together. These life stories are at the core of the identity definition and therefore they are termed 'core stories'.

Conclusions: 'Core stories' enable people with dementia to construct a positive self-identity and to effectively achieve 'ego integrity'. In order to help people with mild dementia accomplish this process, it is recommended to stimulate their long-term memory and to encourage them to take part in well-constructed reminiscence processes.

Biography

Dovrat Harel, PhD, is a certified drama therapist, senior supervisor and lecturer at the Drama Therapy Program, Tel Hai College, Israel. She is a member of The Interdisciplinary Research Center for Arts and Spirituality: Therapy, Education and Society at Tel Hai College. Her research areas include drama therapy and bibliotherapy with older adults, creative arts therapies with people with dementia, drama therapy for family caregivers and sexual assault against women in late life. She developed creative therapeutic methods for the older population, which she has been invited to teach in several countries. She has presented her work at international conferences and published in international referred journals and books.

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