

# Reminiscing: A Love Story to Help Older Patients Heal



Just like in *The Notebook*, helping the elderly remember things past makes the present come alive, a nurses' study finds.

With Valentine's Day around the corner, reminiscing may be the key to a happier heart and a better hospital experience, say a team of Chicago-based researchers who have discovered the profound impact that reminiscing plays as a healing tool not only in Hollywood tearjerkers, but also in inspiring compassion and caring for older hospitalized patients among healthcare professionals. Just as the power of reminiscing reawakened the memory of a great love in Nicholas Sparks' heart-wrenching story, *The Notebook*, researchers at Saint Xavier University School of Nursing have shown that engaging an older patient in telling his or her story is a healing and heart-warming journey for the storyteller and for the nurse who listens.

In *The Notebook*, an older man, played by James Garner, reads a love story aloud from a faded notebook to a woman with Alzheimer's, played by Gena Rowlands. As Garner's character tells the tale, the woman's memories, long buried by the disease, resurface and for a few precious moments, she reconnects her

with the present and recognizes that man sitting next to her is the man in the notebook, the man she's always loved.

Through their innovative research, Peg Gallagher, EdD, RN, CNE, an associate professor at Saint Xavier, along with her colleague, sociology professor Kate Carey, PhD, demonstrated that the power of reminiscing isn't just a film device. Reminiscing has a positive and potentially calming effect on the storyteller and the simple act of listening, say the researchers, helped nursing students with limited experience dealing with seniors overcome their initial fears of caring for these often frail patients faster. Drs. Gallagher and Carey recently presented the results of their innovative research on reminiscing at the 2010 NICHE (Nurses Improving Care for Healthsystem Elders) conference. NICHE is a multifaceted program specifically designed to improve the quality of care for hospitalized older adults and the annual NICHE conference brings together hundreds of nurses, hospital administrators, educators and other healthcare professionals whose shared passion and purpose is to improve care for our seniors.

"NICHE focuses on empowering and educating nurses to provide the best care for older patients. Guided reminiscing can be an important tool that helps establish trust between the patient and the healthcare practitioner," says NICHE Practice Director, Marie Boltz, PhD, RN, GNP-BC. You can read the full report at [nicheprogram.org/families-resources](http://nicheprogram.org/families-resources) or [nicheprogram.org/uploads/File/NICHE\\_FOCUS\\_ON\\_Remimiscing.pdf](http://nicheprogram.org/uploads/File/NICHE_FOCUS_ON_Remimiscing.pdf)

Turns out the Chicago researchers are among a growing number of medical professionals who are putting listening to their patients' stories at the top of their prescription list in both caring for their elder patients and nurturing understanding of older patients among young nurses. Many nursing students have only limited experience with older people or encounter only frail elderly in advanced stages of illness," says Dr. Gallagher. They frequently express fears and discomfort about working with older patients. And yet the reality is that 90% of our students will be caring for elders when they graduate." When the St. Xavier researchers paired nursing students and seniors, the positive responses from both the elders and the nursing student exceeded their expectations. "Everyone was so excited by it," says Dr. Gallagher. Moving forward, the researchers hope to show that this intergenerational interaction will not only change attitudes, it will also influence the students' career choices. "We're looking to measure outcomes, to understand if this type of interaction may encourage students to pursue gerontology," says Dr. Carey.

"We'll track what specialty our students say they want to pursue prior to participating in an intergenerational session and follow how the experience influences their ultimate career choice.

## **Share The Love: Researchers Reminiscing Tips**

### **Getting Started**

- Use open-ended questions: Tell me about your first job. Tell me about your wedding day. What were your favorite foods as a child?
- Encourage memories from different stages—what did you do for fun when you were a teenager? Where did you spend your honeymoon? Tell me about hometown, parents, siblings, school, etc.
- Tell me about your family life—spouse, children, jobs/volunteering and holidays.
- How did [choose an event in history, like WWII, civil rights movement, computer age, etc.] influence you or your family?

### **General Tips**

- Be a good listener: listen actively; maintain eye contact; do not interrupt or correct; be patient and allow adequate time.
- Respond in a positive manner—make comments to encourage the elder to continue.
- Be patient with repetition.
- Use props to prompt recollections (i.e., pictures from the past, memorabilia and music).
- Keep the conversation focused on the person reminiscing, but do share some of your memories on the topic if they relate to topic being discussed.
- In addition, you can use props, like pictures or mementos, or materials like poems or Reminisce Magazine (<http://www.reminisce.com>) to initiate or facilitate discussion.

### **Helping Children Reminisce with Grandparents**

- Children need to be prepared for the interview. Using the guidelines above, such as be patient and listen carefully, family and teachers must appropriately prepare the children.
- Starting with more structure is helpful. For example, letting the children use a picture of the upcoming holiday or of their school will encourage memories for the elder.
- Always be mindful of the child's safety. Elders with Alzheimer's disease or other cognitive impairment can sometimes lash out verbally or physically. If your parent or grandparent is prone to these episodes, it's best not to engage young children in the conversations.

*Provided by: <http://www.parentgiving.com/>*

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