

**Guided Autobiography:
Stimulate Your Brain,
Enhance Well-Being,
Develop Community,
and Create a Legacy**

Cheryl M. Svensson, MSG, PhD & Bonnie L. Bernell, EdD

Telling one's story has meaning, function, and purpose. It can increase a sense of well-being and develop connectedness, community, and create a legacy. Helping clients to find their voice through a range of approaches enhances the development of and move to a more positive place in their life. Even later in life, cognitive activity and social connection appear to delay the onset of a range of neurological concerns, including Alzheimer's disease (Wilson et al., 2013), and may help preserve or improve cognitive skills. Through considering, writing, and sharing one's life story, great things can happen.

Background

Guided Autobiography (GAB) is a method of life story writing created nearly forty years ago by James E. Birren, PhD, an esteemed gerontologist and pioneer in the field of aging. Birren stumbled on the basic concept for GAB while on sabbatical from his post as dean of the Andrus Gerontology Center at the University of Southern California in the 1970s. He was teaching a class at the University of Hawaii on the psychology of aging, and in an attempt to motivate the students to become more involved, he gave them an ungraded assignment: Go home, write two pages on a branching point in your life, and be prepared to read it in class

tomorrow. Once the class had read and heard the other stories, they began to open up and to become involved with and interested in others and in the class.

Birren realized he was on to something important, and when he returned to USC he sought out graduate students to work with him to learn more about autobiography, the power of writing, the mechanics of small group processes, and more. To date, three books have been written on the GAB method (Birren & Cochran, 2001; Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Birren & Feldman, 1997) and countless research articles published. Yes, GAB is a profound, powerful, and inspiring process, but what exactly is it?

GAB Process

Guided Autobiography is generally a series of 10 sessions held weekly, each two or more hours long. The term *autobiography* may be somewhat misleading if you think in terms of factually and chronologically recording a life. It is so much more! Each session is organized around a theme: branching points; the role of family in your life; the role of money in your life; health and body image; spiritual identity; and more. At the beginning of each session, the facilitator gives a mini-lecture on various helpful topics such as mind mapping and other creative-writing tips as well as possible feeling responses the participants may encounter.

The individuals are offered a series of priming or prompting questions that are geared to stimulate their thoughts, feelings, memories, associations, and sensations about their past as it relates to the theme being presented. These priming questions include the opposite parts of a person's experience. For example,

regarding the theme of branching points, a priming question might be, "Has there been any branching point in your life about which you changed your views later, such as its long-range importance in your life or your feelings about it? An example: You were angry then and now feel okay or good about what happened," or, "Was there a single moment when you made a decision about yourself or the world that changed your life going forward?"

Participants are asked to write approximately 1,000 words on the topic and be prepared at the following session to read out loud what they have written. They are reminded to read what is acceptable for them to share in a group, even if they write other thoughts they may not feel okay to let others know. For the reading and sharing of the life stories, the large group is divided into smaller groups of six people. The small groups remain the same for the entire 10 weeks, and the group members get to know one another well as they share personally revealing stories. Everyone must write two pages of their own life story according to the theme for that week. Through the writings and the readings in the small groups, strong bonds are developed.

Feedback given to the writer is only supportive, encouraging, and positive. There is no critique, judgment, or intrusive challenging. As a result, participants learn to empathize and appreciate both their uniqueness and similarities with others, and in the process, learn more about themselves and leave a written legacy.

Personal Outcomes

GAB is not considered therapy since it is not a problem-centered intervention; however it is very therapeutic. The benefits for GAB participants include:

1. learning more about themselves and understanding why, or more about why, they may have done the things they have done;
2. learning to understand and appreciate others and their life stories, thereby feeling more a part of some community because of the shared self-disclosure;
3. writing their own stories from an inner-feeling place, a personal or possibly a vulnerable place, and not simply a chronological time line;
4. developing an enhanced or expanded appreciation for their life experiences;
5. developing close friendships and attachments, often forming their own ongoing community.

Participants are free to go as far and as deep as they choose. There is no one to push them, only to stimulate and motivate them to keep going and continue writing.

Populations Served

A rich target population for the GAB process is the retired or retiring person, the baby boomer—the active older adult. As a service for individuals covered by Medicare, this process can be of tremendous therapeutic value. It meets many needs for people 65 and older because it allows them to find meaning in their life; heal residual or long-standing issues by creating a story that helps them see their life differently, perhaps more clearly and with greater compassion for self; and become part of a community, thus avoiding the isolation that is often damaging to older persons who may be out of the work force or see their friends moving, becoming ill, or dying. In addition, the GAB process has a stimulating impact on the

brain that leads to an increased sense of personal power, recognition of past adaptive strategies and application to current problems, resurgence of interest in past activities and hobbies, and a greater sense of meaning in life (Birren & Birren, 1996).

The GAB process can and has been adapted for many other populations and in a range of formats. One alternative to the 10-week process is individual full-day workshops with a theme, prompting questions, required writing, reading, and support. People can and do come as they choose for the particular theme and as their lives permit.

Research

One of the first research studies about Guided Autobiography was conducted by Birren and Reedy (1980) who found that for a sample of 45 subjects, pre- and post-test scores showed:

- increased self-acceptance
- decreased anxiety/tension
- increased energy/vigor
- increased positive view of others
- increased connectedness

The research examined the *3-selves* based on the Leary Interpersonal Checklist scale. This scale measures the *real*, the *ideal*, and the *social* selves that make up our narrative self, or the self we tell ourselves we are. The social-image self refers to how we think other people view us, the real-self is the self we tell ourselves we are, and the ideal-self is the self we would like to be. The results showed that the distance between the three selves diminished or became more

congruent. Thus, the tension one may feel because of the distances between the selves is reduced. A surprising finding was how the subjects' views of other people changed from pre- to post-GAB. After participating in 10 weeks of sharing life stories, the participants' views of others became more like their views of themselves. In other words, they saw themselves as more similar than different from one another. This is what leads to bonding and attachments.

Reker, Birren, and Svensson (2013) replicated these results in a study with Guided Autobiography students. Three indicators of structural change were measured and analyzed: *self-aspect congruence*, *self-aspect integration*, and *self-aspect consistency*. For all participants, results revealed a significant increase over time in self-aspect congruence (actual/ideal and actual/social image) and self-aspect integration (actual self only), while self-aspect consistency remained constant and high. Compared to younger adults, older adults showed significantly greater congruence in actual/ideal and actual/social image self-aspects following the GAB experience. Moreover, greater self-aspect congruence was associated with positive evaluations of others and life at present. The findings help to understand the underlying mechanisms that operate when individuals report having grown personally through GAB.

There is a rapidly growing body of literature on the benefits of cognitive activity and social connection with regards to neurological functioning. NIH-funded research projects such as ACE-Seniors (Activities for Cognitive Enhancement of Seniors) at Stanford University (<http://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT01094509>) and the Memory and Aging Project at Rush University Medical Center (<http://www.rush.edu/rumc/page-1099611542239.html>) are investigating numerous factors that contribute to and guard against cognitive decline (for an overview and

findings, see Bennett et al. 2012). In a recently published article, Wilson et al. (2013) reported that more frequent late-life cognitive activity and early-life cognitive activity were each associated with slower cognitive decline; they concluded that “more frequent cognitive activity across the life span has an association with slower late-life cognitive decline that is independent of common neuropathologic conditions, consistent with the cognitive reserve hypothesis.” Although the Stanford study has not yet published results, one of the cognitive-activity variables included in the protocol is Guided Autobiography.

Conclusion

Guided Autobiography can be a valuable resource for older clients and for the psychologist who wants to provide a well-established, evidence-based intervention for that widely underserved population. It is also beneficial for many disparate populations. Training and consultation on how to manage, customize, and provide GAB is available.

References

- Bennett, D., Schneider, J., Buchman, A., Barnes, L., Boyle, P., & Wilson, R. (2012). Overview and findings from the Rush Memory and Aging Project. *Current Alzheimer Research*, 9(6), 646-663.
- Birren, J. & Birren, B. (1996). Autobiography: Exploring the self and encouraging development. In J. Birren, G. Kenyon, J. Ruth, J. Schroots, & T. Svensson (Eds.), *Aging and biography: Explorations in adult development* (pp. 283-299). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Birren, J., & Cochran, K. (2001). *Telling stories of life through Guided Autobiography groups*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Birren, J., & Deutchman, D. (1991). *Guiding autobiography groups for older adults*.

Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Birren, J., & Feldman, L. (1997). *Where to go from here*. New York: Simon &

Schuster.

Reedy, M., & Birren, J. (1980, September). *Life review through Guided*

Autobiography. Poster session presented at the annual meeting of the

American Psychological Association, Montreal, Canada.

Reker, G., Birren, J., & Svensson, C. (2013). *Self-aspect reconstruction through*

Guided Autobiography: Exploring underlying processes. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Wilson, R., Boyle, P., Yu, L., Barnes, L., Schneider, J., & Bennett, D. (2013). Life-

span cognitive activity, neuropathologic burden, and cognitive aging.

Neurology, 81(4), 314-321.

BIO

Cheryl M. Svensson, MSG, PhD, (cheryl@guidedautobiography.com) is the Director for the Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies and an instructor in the Davis School of Gerontology at USC. She earned her PhD in psychology from the University of Lund, Sweden. Her focus has been on small group processes and life story writing. She currently is teaching Guided Autobiography instructor training through Cisco WebEx, a live interactive online platform (www.guidedautobiography.com).

Bonnie L. Bernell, EdD, (BLBernell@gmail.com) is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Los Altos, CA, and specializes in couples, sexuality, and Guided Autobiography. She was an adjunct professor at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and Santa Clara University. She earned her EdD in counseling psychology from Lehigh University. She is the author of *Bountiful Women* and co-authored a chapter in *Treating Sexual Disorders*. Consultation and CE credit is available: www.BonnieBernell.com.