

# MindAlert



## Benefits of Memory Priming: Effects of Guided Autobiography and Reminiscence

2006 Special Lecture by James E. Birren, PhD, DSC

A Joint Program of  
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## INTRODUCTION

Older adults possess a lifetime of autobiographical information that can be evoked and organized by priming their memories in a group setting. For 30 years, James Birren has been helping elders tell their life stories through courses in guided autobiography.

In the lecture transcribed in this booklet, Dr. Birren explains the process of guided autobiography and enumerates its many benefits—both for older adults and for the organizations they frequent. In addition, he discusses how people’s life stories can benefit researchers who wish to glean in-depth information about the human condition, and outlines research issues provoked by the qualitative analysis of autobiographical data.

Dr. Birren presented this special lecture in March 2006 at the Joint Conference of the American Society on Aging and the National Council on Aging as part of the MindAlert program. Sponsored by the American Society on Aging and MetLife Foundation, MindAlert is dedicated to sharing the findings of the latest research on maintaining and enhancing cognitive function in later life.

Also included in this booklet are profiles of the winners of the 2006 MindAlert Awards, which recognize programs that promote mental fitness in older adults, as well as an annotated list of past MindAlert monographs.

# BENEFITS OF MEMORY PRIMING:

## Effects of Guided Autobiography and Reminiscence

**JAMES E. BIRREN**

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Why is interest in autobiography and reminiscence growing so strongly today? An adequate answer to this question is beyond the scope of the topic I'm addressing here, but I want to make some comments about it. I believe that as modern society has become increasingly efficient, it has also become increasingly impersonal. E-mail and cell phones, for example, have increased our efficiency by decreasing the time gap once inherent in communicating with each other. Furthermore, in many large shops, we can now make purchases without speaking to any personnel, scanning items

*I believe that as modern society has become increasingly efficient, it has also become increasingly impersonal.*

ourselves and putting a credit card or cash into an automatic device that can even give us our change. We can shop on the Internet and have our purchases delivered without having personal contact with anyone. When I grew up, the world was vastly different. Shops were small and their owners—butchers, bakers, green grocers, and druggists, for example—were not only present but also knew their customers by name and often gave children a bite of something to eat. In three of the large shops where I now go several times a week, I know only one clerk by name. I don't know any of the owners because these establishments are all chain stores.

A few years ago, while visiting a colleague of mine in Amsterdam, I went to

an open shopping market with him and his family. I was amazed to see the marketplace owners give the two young girls a bit of fruit, calling them and their parents by name. Later, at the butcher shop, my colleague asked the clerk, the owner's son, where his father was. A personal explanation followed; I stood there in astonishment as scenes of past years flashed through my mind. Merchandise may be less expensive and be of better quality today, but our consumer experience, at least in the United States, is becoming an almost robotic process. The personal exchanges that occurred in the shops of yesteryear are long gone. Furthermore, school-age boys and girls often play games on computers instead of playing with friends. I believe that as we have become more efficient as a society, we have also moved toward being a less personal one, with less daily time spent in human interactions. Whether or not the impersonal age is contributing to the interest in autobiography and reminiscence, my colleagues and I are facing a surge of interest in life stories. I'd like to tell you why life stories are so important not only for elders, but also for our communities and society at large.

### AUTOBIOGRAPHY DEFINED

An autobiography is the story of a life told by the person who has lived it. The Oxford English dictionary defines autobiography more concisely as "The writing of one's own history; the story of one's life written by himself." Today, I would add "or herself" to that definition, since women seem to be a bit more interested in writing their autobiographies than are

men. In the 30 years that I have been conducting guided autobiography classes and workshops, I've had only one class in which the number of men and women students was equal. Usually, men comprise about one-third of the participants.

Your autobiography is the story of your life—its details, events, and plot lines. Writing it begins with digging out the details of rich memories and arranging them in some order. Guided autobiography can help older adults do just that.

## **GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY DEFINED**

Guided autobiography is a method of assisting individuals in preparing their personal histories. This process uses life themes and memory-priming questions to help group participants recall memories and to organize them in the telling of their life stories.

The basic pattern of a guided autobiography course is 10 weekly sessions of two to two-and-a-half hours. Every week, the instructor introduces a new theme and gives participants a list of sensitizing questions. Participants go home to write after each class. By the end of the course, they will have written on a total of nine themes:

1. The major branching points in your life
2. Your family
3. The role of money in your life
4. Your major life's work
5. The history of your health and your body
6. Your experiences with death and dying
7. Your sexual identity
8. Your spiritual, religious, and philosophical life
9. The history of your goals and aspirations

Back in class, after a new theme is introduced with discussion, participants break up into small groups in which they read what they have written on the theme of the week. In a sense, the life themes form the basic threads that bind together the content of our lives. If our lives were pictured on weavings with successive action scenes, the horizontal threads holding the fabric together would be the plots and subplots of our narratives, the stories we tell ourselves and others.

The first life theme we use in guided autobiography is that of the major branching points in your life. Branching points are events, experiences, or insights that have affected the subsequent flow of your life's journey. These can be

*The life themes form the basic threads that bind together the content of our lives.*

major events, such as a marriage, the death of a close family member, a move to a new city, or a major financial gain or loss. Sometimes small events—such as reading a book or meeting someone who has a useful idea—have major outcomes. Big outcomes can have small beginnings. In guided autobiography, we encourage the use of metaphors; in the case of major branching points in life, we ask, "If your life is like a river, what caused it to flow in the directions it did?" One woman said in response to this question that her life was like crabgrass—she put down roots in one place and then sent out shoots to establish new roots. A metaphor referring to life themes is that they are "fishing holes where many surprising fish can be caught."

Branching points can have positive or negative consequences, or can have a mixture of outcomes. For example, losing a job can be traumatic, but the loss can

lead to personal growth if it stimulates rethinking and taking some new steps in life. In the context of crises, the group experience is especially important since individuals can have different life outcomes to major events. One guided autobiography participant, for example, described living through the Great Depression and explained how difficult it was for his family. In the same group, another person said that her experience of the Great Depression was very different: She grew up on a farm where she always had a warm home and plenty of food because her family would barter their farm goods for things they needed.

*“If your life is like a river, what caused it to flow in the directions it did?”*

The following example shows how big outcomes can have small beginnings. In a guided autobiography session, one man described his confusion about what to do upon his discharge from military service in World War II. A friend of his told him he would be going to college to take advantage of the educational benefits the government was offering to veterans. Though none of his family members had gone to college, the man followed his friend’s lead and decided to go to college. Many years later, he ended up becoming one of the pioneers in a new field of science.

The group experience is very important for stimulating people’s memories. The use of priming or sensitizing questions evokes participants’ significant memories of past events.

## MEMORY PRIMING

Sensitizing questions expand on the major life themes to provoke recall of a lifetime of memories. Examples of priming questions are “What was the earliest branching point in your life that you remember?” “Who influenced the direction of your life in a major way?” “Has your background been an advantage or a disadvantage to you?”

Many measurements have shown that crystallized intelligence, or long-term memory, may continue to improve over much of the adult lifespan, whereas fluid intelligence (short-term memory) declines. One of the common measures of crystallized intelligence is vocabulary. My professor at Northwestern University, Robert Seashore, developed a vocabulary test that could be used to determine the number of words known by participants. Results showed that vocabulary size doubles from the time people are in their 20s to when they are in their 60s, from approximately 23,000 words to about 46,000 words. These words are stored in the brain with little energy expenditure. In contrast, fluid intelligence requires speed and energy to maintain recent memory and eventually convert it into long-term storage, or crystallized intelligence.

A Canadian researcher, A. E. David Schonfield, found that a vocabulary test asking participants to recognize specific words out of a set of words showed a larger improvement in performance by elders than young adults. In other words, recognition is easier for older adults than recall—as is evident, for example, in the increased occurrence of tip-of-the-tongue phenomena, or searching for the right word, that people frequently experience as they get older. Recognition primes the memory, which is why the sensitizing questions and the group process of guided autobiography both encourage recall.

The group process of priming memories works through bringing to light similarities and differences in the recalled memories of participants. In guided autobiography classes, I often hear such comments as “Oh, I remember something like that happening to me when I started school” or “I also broke my leg on a playground.” Differences can also evoke memories. A comment such as “I was a healthy child and was rarely sick” can bring forth a contrasting memory: “I had polio when I was a child, and it left its mark on me.”

The human nervous system has a vast store of memories, and individuals can benefit from outside stimulation to gain access to them. The group process in guided autobiography stimulates the recall of memories that are filed away in crystallized memory. Furthermore, our memories take different forms. We might be stimulated to recall an event by an odor, a picture, a feeling, or even body position and spatial orientation. A complex event like visiting an early residence, for example, can elicit memories on many levels, including those of emotions. Likewise, the feelings that evolve in a group can facilitate latent or remote memories of significant events. Participants’ occasional laughter or tears while describing an event from their lives can also prime the memories of other group members.

In addition to tapping into the vast store of memories, the life themes used in guided autobiography also stimulate the organization of memories. We have many events in our lives, but understanding how they fit into the plots and subplots of our life stories requires making sense of separate events as part of a whole. The life themes help provoke the organization of our life stories into plot lines. Your autobiography includes all the details, the chapters, and the plot lines of the story of your life.

The vast size of our crystallized intelligence or autobiographical memory has yet to be estimated or measured. Whatever the size of our memory stores, however, provoking or priming memories via a structured group process is an excellent way to gain access to them.

## **BENEFITS OF GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY FOR INDIVIDUALS**

The principle motive for people who take guided autobiography courses is usually to write their autobiography to give to their family and friends. In addition to this tangible benefit, guided autobiography offers important indirect benefits to individuals. Some of these benefits are similar to the benefits of therapy, but since it is not centered on personal

*The group experience is very important for stimulating people’s memories.*

problem-solving, guided autobiography is not therapy. Like having a cup of coffee or tea and a conversation with a colleague or friend that leads to new insights and life changes, guided autobiography can be therapeutic without being regarded as therapy. The indirect benefits of sharing your life story in a group include increasing your self-knowledge through telling your story, as well as listening to the stories of others.

Daily life tends to focus on the here and the now, the issues of the day, whereas guided autobiography leads one on paths through vast stores of memories, usually leading to an increased awareness and appreciation of having lived through so much.

Margaret N. Reedy and I studied 45 participants in a 10-session guided autobiography course, assessing where people were both before and after the course.

One of the surprising findings was that some of the largest changes subjects made was in their view of other people. These results suggest that if you participate in a group that shares life stories, your concept of other people becomes more like your view of yourself. When you change your views of others to become more like your view of yourself, you find other people more acceptable and more comfortable to be with. Identifying with other people in this way results in attachments and friendships among group members. Indications of such bonds are seen in the desire of guided autobiography groups to con-

*If you participate in a group that shares life stories, your concept of other people becomes more like your view of yourself.*

tinue meeting, scheduling reunions to write and talk about new themes. The group process of sharing life stories results in the formation of strong new friendships.

Guided autobiography also fosters change within the self. The distances between the ideal self, the actual self, and the social-image self diminish. In this context, the ideal self is the self we would like to be, the real self is the self we believe ourselves to be, and the social-image self is how we believe other people view us. Much of the tension in adolescence presumably stems from the distances between the ideal, real, and social-image selves. Participation in guided autobiography appears to reduce the differences between these three aspects of ourselves, a change that usually leads to increased self-acceptance.

The ideal self, the actual self, and the social-image self are elements of the narrative self—the self we tell ourselves

we are. In a 2004 study of 423 community residents ages 70 years and older, Gill Windle and Robert Woods regarded the narrative self as a psychological resource. In this view, guided autobiography is a pathway to a more acceptable view of the self that helps individuals adapt to life changes. If so, the indirect benefits to individuals for participating in guided autobiography are of considerable value.

## **BENEFITS FOR INSTITUTIONS**

Retirement homes, community organizations, churches, and other institutions can obtain benefits from conducting guided autobiography groups. As I indicated earlier, friendships or attachments result from the group process of sharing life stories—a view supported by the fact that participants in guided autobiography groups often want to establish regular reunions. An organization for retirees that offers guided autobiography courses has the advantage of encouraging friendships that would transcend the usual level of relationships commonly found in organizations that do not offer such courses. Such emerging attachments can be an asset in institutions and organizations, resulting in a heightened sense of community, increased overall organizational strength and well-being, and more volunteering by members who will have a greater bond to other members and a higher stake in the organization or institution as a whole.

## **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Using the information from autobiographies holds numerous implications for research. With the permission of participants and with guaranteed anonymity, I have gathered more than 300 autobiographies. These life stories have been used in theses and dissertations for vari-

ous purposes. The structured process and the succession of life themes that generated these autobiographies allows ease of comparison and study. In addition, the pre-course and post-course measurements collected from group participants can be used to determine which people change the most in the guided autobiography process and how those changes affect them.

The selves we tell ourselves we are, our narrative selves, influence our decisions: A lifetime of experiences shape our values and influence our choices. In the past, professionals in the field of psychology largely ignored the narrative self as a “soft,” unscientific area of study. More recently, that situation has changed. In one of the broadest views of the significance of the narrative self, Gerard Brugman regards the concept of the narrative self as lying close to that of wisdom. The assumption here is that the development of wisdom and the display of wise behavior depends on a knowledge of the self. Knowing ourselves involves not only being familiar with our strengths and weaknesses but also understanding how we interpret our lives. Expanding on that idea in the *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging*, in a chapter I coauthored with Johannes J. F. Schroots, I stated that “the narrative self is the product of a dynamic process involving memory, cognition, emotion, and motivations that equips an individual to take a top-down view of himself or herself and make choices that are consistent with evolving values and goals.”

Jerome Bruner writes that the construction of the self results from a mixture of inside and outside information or experiences—an array of memories, feelings, ideas, and beliefs that interact with cultural influences. The development of the self is a lifelong process of understanding and of viewing oneself. Guided autobiography explores this process and presumably makes it more apparent to participants as they review the memories

they have accumulated over their lifetimes. Gary Reker and Kerry Chamberlain point out that people have a desire to obtain meaning in life that persists through the lifespan. In *The Self We Live*



By, James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium summarize their view of the importance of the self: “Nearly everything we attempt or accomplish today is done in relation to what kind of selves we are.”

*guided autobiography is a pathway to  
a more acceptable view of the self*

The literature provides a view of the self as an object that we continually construct and live by in our daily behavior. Guided autobiography appears to offer a window on the complexity of the narrative self—and perhaps contributes to its more effective construction while leading to important questions, if not answers.



## RESEARCH ISSUES PROVOKED BY GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Numerous new topics arise from the study of autobiographies, and their analysis appears to answer some important questions about human behavior. For example, how individuals find meaning in their lives can be explored by reading their autobiographies.

In her 1987 dissertation, "The Development of Meaning-in-Life in Adulthood," Bonnie Hedlund concludes that "once issues of personal development have been resolved, meaning-in-life remains stable across adulthood, and with increasing age, the content of meaning-in-life gravitates toward sources that are external to the individual." According to her findings, "Young adults appear to be primarily concerned with issues of self-worth and self-identity; however, how these concerns are expressed are qualitatively different for males and females. Young women choose to either to evaluate themselves in self-depreciating terms and to passively accept that they are limited by their self-views or they feel that in order to be acceptable to themselves and others they must succeed in life without help or support from other people. Young men tend to project their self-doubts onto the external world. In other words, the world is reported to be at fault rather than themselves. This may be related to differences in social role expectations for women and men in our society."

Hedlund's sample included 60 adults ages 22 to 78 years, with 30 males and 30 females. Influences of ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status could hardly be determined with such a limited sample. However, her findings provoke important questions for further study, such as whether men regard their lives as resulting primarily from their own actions and women see their lives as being shaped by external causes, even as they

get older. Such questions relate to the inside views of life that autobiographies may help answer.

For example, we may ask individuals whether how they have lived their lives differs from how they think they should have lived them. Eugene Bianchi uses the word interiority with regard to a person's inner awareness or focus on life. He interprets available research as indicating that older adults, particularly men, move from active concern with the outside world to a more internal perspective as they age. This result contrasts with some of Hedlund's conclusions and suggests that further research on the relation of age to internal views of life is needed. Bianchi's conclusions may partly explain people's increasing interest in autobiography as they enter their later years. His view also brings up the question of whether men and women essentially regard their lives from the same perspective.

In a study of human values in adult life based on a sample of 14,000 people in 13 countries, in every country the belief in one God was higher in females than in males. These data suggest that women tend to adhere to the religious beliefs of their cultures, whereas men tend to have their personal beliefs. The relevance of this information to autobiography is that life stories can tell us how individuals interpret causal influences in their lives.

For example, in an autobiography group that had been holding reunion sessions for over six years, I suggested a new life theme for writing and discussion: "What has been the role of luck in my life?" Four people out of the 10 who participated in the group said they couldn't write from that perspective because of their belief that God was responsible for, or in charge of their lives—so chance was not a factor. Of the participants who did write about the role of chance in

their lives, one man said, “I have been very lucky.” Studying autobiographies can tell us how individuals attribute causality in their lives: a spectrum ranging from individuals with strong religious beliefs who say that God has been good to them to those who maintain that they are the basic cause of the outcomes in their lives. At another level of analysis, the role of such beliefs in determining people’s perspectives on life and how these beliefs affect behavior awaits further research. The study of autobiographies has the potential for answering such questions. Furthermore, the addition of autobiographical material to longitudinal studies may help provide information about life outcomes as well.

### PRIMING LIFE CONCEPTS

In addition to priming memories with the use of questions and life themes, guided autobiography can stimulate concepts or broad ideas about our lives. For example, the guided autobiography group leader may ask the question, “If you were writing a book about your life, what would be its title?” The leader may prime ideas by volunteering his or her own title, then encourage participants to share the titles of their life stories—words that grasp the kernel of their life’s meaning. In addition, the group’s suggestions can help stimulate the reflections of those who don’t think in terms of embracing concepts or metaphors. A sampling of life-story titles I’ve heard include “My Road Got Me Here, But There Were Many Potholes”; “God Didn’t Want Me and Neither Did the Devil, So I Went My Own Way”; “I Am Not Sure I Believe It Myself, But Here Is My Story”; and “You Win in Life by Buying Low and Selling High: I Often Did It the Other Way Around.”

### SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The study of autobiographies leads to myriad ideas for looking at previously unexplored aspects of people’s lives. Among the many new research possibilities is examining the role of guilt in individuals’ life stories, as well as the role of culture. For example, an exchange between a European and a Japanese man in a guided autobiography session indicated that after World War II, the Germans began to blame themselves for

*how individuals find meaning in their lives can be explored by reading their autobiographies.*

events, whereas the Japanese blamed the Emperor, who was the symbol of their culture and also a God figure. The role of culture and each individual’s interpretation of it can be revealed in autobiography and can shed light on some important questions.

### LIFE FLOWS ON

The last life theme of the guided autobiography sessions focuses on the history of participants’ aspirations and goals, a discussion that often leads into questions of people’s values and how they have emerged. These sessions inspired two guided autobiography leaders to develop an outgrowth class titled Your Life Portfolio. The new class follows the same pattern of themes and priming questions as the original guided autobiography course, but directs them toward revealing how individuals have invested their lives in the past, how they are investing their lives at present, and how they want to invest them in the future. The success of the life portfolio class indicates that the guided autobiography pattern of priming life themes and expanding on them with sensitizing questions can be adapted for studying a variety of life issues.

## SUMMARY

Autobiographies are the stories of people's lives as told by themselves. Guided autobiography is a method of stimulating autobiographical memories in groups using life themes and priming questions. Individuals, especially elders, have vast latent stores of autobiographical memories that can be evoked by hearing other people's life stories. The similarities and differences in life experiences shared by members of such a group are very effective in helping people elicit and understand memories that might not surface otherwise.

The group process of guided autobiography, plus the use of memory priming, can result in several benefits, both for older adults and for the organizations or institutions they frequent. Individuals raise their self-appreciation by recalling

in the projection of causality over the events, the flow, and the decision points in people's lives. Autobiography can be a path to increasing our understanding of individuals' inside views of life and how these views may influence the outcomes of life in terms of health and well-being, especially as people enter their later years.

*Individuals, especially elders, have vast latent stores of autobiographical memories that can be evoked by hearing other people's life stories.*

and talking about all they have lived through. In addition, the sharing of life stories by guided autobiography participants results in attachments that lead to interest in furthering group meetings. This result benefits not only individuals but also institutions that sponsor autobiographical groups, since it leads to strengthened personal social networks. These social attachments also appear to motivate participants to become involved in new activities, including volunteer work.

Guided autobiography has research implications via the collection and qualitative analysis of autobiographies. Important issues that could be studied in more depth by examining autobiographies include, for example, individual differences

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James E. Birren, PhD, DSc, serves as associate director for the Center on Aging at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He is also adjunct professor of medicine/gerontology, psychiatry, and biobehavioral sciences in the UCLA School of Medicine, as well as professor emeritus of gerontology and psychology at the University of Southern California (USC), also located in Los Angeles. In 1965, Dr. Birren founded the program in gerontology at USC and became director of the Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center and the dean of the Leonard Davis School of Gerontology.



He began his career working with rodents as a behavioral psychologist, but changed his focus after his “retirement” to studying autobiography and the search for meaning in later life. The culmination of that interest was the publication of the book *Telling the Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups* (2001), which draws from Dr. Birren’s 30 years of conducting guided autobiography workshops to help elders tell their life stories.

In addition to this book, Dr. Birren has published extensively in the area of aging. He is series editor of the internationally recognized *Handbooks of Aging*, and has more than 250 publications in academic journals and books. Among his other projects, he edited the *Encyclopedia of Gerontology* (1966) and coauthored *Where to Go From Here* (1997), a book on autobiography. He also served as editor for *Aging and Biography: Explorations in Adult Development* (1996), as well as coeditor for the *Handbook of Psychology and Aging* series and the book *History of Geropsychology in Autobiography* (2000).

Among Dr. Birren’s many awards are the Brookdale Foundation Award for Gerontological Research, the International Association of Gerontology’s 1989 Sandoz Prize for Gerontological Research, the 1990 Award for Outstanding Contribution to Gerontology from the Canadian Association of Gerontology, and the 2002 Career Contribution to Gerontology Award from the Gerontological Society of America. He has offered his expertise to help develop priorities for national policy several times as a delegate to the White House Conference on Aging.

## FOR FURTHER READING

Here are some of the books and research studies that Dr. Birren refers to in his lecture:

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# 2006 MINDALERT AWARDS

The ASA-MetLife Foundation MindAlert Awards were established to recognize innovations in mental fitness programming for older adults. Inspired by research showing that cognitive decline is not inevitable in aging, these awards recognize programs, products, or tools that promote cognitive fitness in later life. The programs are judged for their innovation, their basis in research, demonstration of their effectiveness, potential for replication, and the extent to which the programs are accessible to diverse populations of elders. The awards are given in three categories:

- Programs that enhance mental fitness for older adults in general
- Programs that enhance mental fitness for older adults with cognitive impairment
- Learning programs for older adults

The winners of each year's awards are recognized at the annual Joint Conference of the American Society on Aging and the National Council on Aging. In addition to attending a program exchange where conference-goers are able to interact with them directly, representatives from the winning organizations give brief overviews of their programs at a conference workshop.

For more information on the MindAlert program, including how to submit an application for the MindAlert awards, visit [www.asaging.org/mindalert](http://www.asaging.org/mindalert).

## PROGRAM FOR GENERAL MENTAL FITNESS

### Staying Sharp: Current Advances in Brain Research

NRTA: AARP's Educator Community and the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives Washington, DC

The Staying Sharp campaign focuses on educating older adults about how the brain works and teaching them how to maximize brain function and brain health, particularly in the second half of life. Staying Sharp disseminates its message through a coordinated multimedia effort that includes live presentations, TV broadcasts, print materials, and a website.

The campaign is a collaboration between NRTA and the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives, a nonprofit organization of more than 250 leading neuroscientists, including ten Nobel laureates. In 2004 and 2005, Staying Sharp conducted 15 forums on brain health around the United States, featuring question-and-answer sessions with Dana Alliance neuroscientists and reaching a total audience of 8,000 older adults from diverse communities. In addition, NRTA is testing a grassroots replication model that makes use of packaged video clips featuring neuroscientists discussing the latest research on brain health in later life.

Staying Sharp has five core publications, available in both English and Spanish, that target critical aspects of cognitive fitness, including quality of life, memory loss and aging, depression, chronic health issues, and lifelong learning. The Staying Sharp website, at [www.aarp.org/health/brain/program](http://www.aarp.org/health/brain/program), provides information on upcoming presentations, access to electronic versions of the Staying Sharp booklets, and useful resources related to brain health in the second half of life.

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## **PROGRAM FOR ELDERS WITH COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT**

### **Focus on SPECS: Social, Physical, Emotional, Cognitive, Spiritual**

Macklin Intergenerational Institute  
Findlay, OH

The SPECS program promotes intergenerational connections and creates many natural opportunities for residents of long-term care to develop socially, physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually. Older adults and children at the Macklin Institute interact daily, in both spontaneous and familiar activities.

A collaboration among Birchaven Retirement Village, Julien Faisant Adult Day Services, Blanchard Valley Health Association, and Marilyn's Lifelong Educational Center at the Macklin Intergenerational Institute, the enriched environment engendered by this stimulating, age-integrated setting provides both care and ongoing interactions for children and older adults. The young and the old thrive and benefit as multigenerational interactions promote positive self-esteem and confidence, improve physical and cognitive function, and allow individuals to feel better about life in general.

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## **LEARNING PROGRAMS FOR OLDER ADULTS**

### **My Turn**

Kingsborough Community College  
Brooklyn, NY

The My Turn Program, one of the first in the United States to offer a college educational experience to elders, serves about 2,000 students in four semesters each academic year. The program began as an educational offering for older adults and quickly evolved into a multi-dimensional experience engaging participants as stakeholders in a learning environment where they can truly belong.

My Turn participants, whether they work toward a degree or choose to take courses for personal interest, must take all courses for college credit. Other activities in the My Turn program include volunteer positions for older adults at the college, such as "Talking Buddies," a collaboration with the English as a Second Language program. In a project with the New York Board of Education, elders help teenagers with language and math skills. "My Turn Outreach," a new addition to the program, offers monthly lectures by Kingsborough College professors to the residents of a local nursing home.

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## AWARDS REVIEW COMMITTEE

The American Society on Aging wishes to thank the committee members who dedicated many hours to reviewing the applications for the MindAlert awards:

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# PAST MINDALERT SPECIAL LECTURES

The annual MindAlert monographs from 2001 to the present are available on the American Society on Aging website at [www.asaging.org/mindalert](http://www.asaging.org/mindalert) as free, easily downloadable PDF files. Past monographs:

## **GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE AGING BRAIN!**

Nationally known brain researchers Marian Diamond and Arnold Scheibel describe their groundbreaking studies of brain function and the optimistic implications for successful aging. (2001)

## **BRAIN HEALTH FROM 1 TO 100**

Paul Nussbaum, a leading clinical neuropsychologist, describes what he refers to as a health promotion opportunity of unprecedented stature: the ability to foster our own brain wellness for healthy, functional aging. (2002)

## **CENTENARIANS: LESSONS ON LIVING LONG AND LIVING WELL**

Head of the renowned New England Centenarian Study, Thomas Perls shares the findings of his research and talks about how we all can make our later years healthy, vital ones. (2003)

## **UNITING THE HEART AND MIND: HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE**

Gene Cohen, a pioneer in the field of creative aging, explains the implications of his four developmental stages of late life and how these phases represent a richly creative period, full of personal growth and societal engagement. (2004)

## **INTELLECTUAL FUNCTIONING IN ADULTHOOD: GROWTH, MAINTENANCE, DECLINE, AND MODIFIABILITY**

Husband-and-wife research team K. Warner Schaie and Sherry L. Willis, who gathered data from thousands of people over long periods of time in the Seattle Longitudinal Study, shed light on the differences between elders who maintain their intellectual functioning into late life and those whose cognitive abilities decline. (2005)