

Planning and Decision Making through Life Story

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A life story is how we tell others where we came from, what we value in life, and how all the parts in our personal history come together to make us who we are. Part of who we are includes what we want to do in the future. Life story focuses heavily on the past, but we can use these experiences to help us think about and plan for the future.

It is not likely that we would take a long trip or vacation without some detail about the destination. This is because not having a good road map makes it more difficult to chart our course. The same goes for our well-being and our future decisions, choices, and aspirations. We need to plan.

One way to think about and organize a life story is to separate our life into key life domains. Common life domains include family/friends, place/home, education, work/volunteer, recreation/leisure, spirituality, historical contexts and health. Upon gathering information about life events and experiences within these domains, we can then organize the information according to the different stages in our life: childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood and old age. To add a future component, think about each of the life domains and life stages ahead of you in regard to what you want and will need to do. Think about your future dreams, aspirations, plans, choices, and decisions.

We are never too young or too old to think about our life story and our future. This is because every stage of life is full of choices and decisions.

As a teenager and young adult we may struggle with difficult questions such as:

- Do you want to go to college?
- Do you want to get married?
- Do you want to have children?
- Do you want to buy a house?

As we grow older, we can think about what we learned from past decisions, challenges, and accomplishments and use those experiences to help guide us through tough decisions, such as:

- Do you want to get a divorce?
- Do you want to move to a retirement home?
- Do you want to travel?
- Do you want to start a new job or career?

To realize our goals we also need to think about what it will take to reach them, who can help us, and what resources are available. Writing down goals, including anticipated plans and decisions, can help us create a strategy that allows us to draw on various resources, including people, to help us reach our goals. It is also important to share our thoughts about the future and what is important in case family or friends need to carry out a decision that we are no longer able to make. While family can help support the “fun stuff” on our future goals list, they are also often there for us or become involved with two of life’s common decision stressors--finances and health care decisions. If family is not available, then part of our planning should include seeking resources and services that can help.

Keeping Our Future in Focus

Making a list of things we want to do before we die—a “bucket list”—can help us focus on our future.

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When some people hear the phrase “bucket list” they may think of daring stunts such as jumping out of an airplane, climbing a mountain, or going on an expensive vacation. These are all things that we could put on our bucket list, but we are not limited to extreme or expensive adventures.

A “bucket list” can include a range of activity:

- Seeing children and grandchildren get married or graduate
- Celebrating a milestone wedding anniversary
- Mending a broken relationship
- Taking time for yourself
- Visiting all seven continents

Using Life Story to Start Conversations about the Future

More often than not, people put off talking about the future or may avoid the topic and hope that things will “work themselves out.” When talking to someone about the future it is important to:

- **Be clear.** We can share why an issue is important by talking about the ways significant events and experiences from our life have influenced our beliefs and values.
- **Share a bucket list.** We need to explain why a certain activity or decision is on our list and talk about how and when we hope to reach a goal or why we plan to make a certain decision.
- **Include dreams, aspirations, plans, and decisions.** Planning for the future can include many things. We don’t have to tackle too many issues at once. It may be easier to have a series of conversations over time. We can use our life story as a conversation starter and place marker.
- **Listen.** Our friends and family may have different values and beliefs than our own. Becoming familiar with their life story can help us to better understand their future decisions and why they may feel a certain way towards our own.

To Better Focus on the Future

Think about answers to the following questions:

- Where do you see yourself in five years?
- Where do you see yourself in ten years?
- Do you want an education? How much education? What kind of education?
- Do you plan on having a job or career?
- Are you prepared or preparing yourself to be able to check things off your “bucket list?”
- Are you satisfied with your health?
- Are you satisfied with your financial situation?
- Have you talked with your loved ones about the type of health care you may need in the future?

Using Future Planning to Help Us Become the Person We Want to Be

When we plan to exercise or eat healthfully, we often do this because we know it is good for us. Planning for our future gives positive benefits by:

- Supporting mental health
- Providing a sense of autonomy and control
- Guiding decision making and planning
- Connecting the past, present and future
- Supporting healthy relationships

Modifying Future Goals and Dreams Requires Mental Healthiness

Sometimes events, either positive or negative, can change life’s plan. It can be emotionally and mentally challenging to change or modify our bucket list because of a sudden or unexpected event. Maintaining good mental health can help us share our feelings and successfully handle changes and challenges.

Conclusion

Documenting life story can help us create a strategy for future planning and decision making. As we think about our life story, we should look for ways that past and present experiences influence future dreams, aspirations, choices, plans, and decisions.

Create a Bucket List

Nothing is too big or too small for a bucket list. You may want to jump out of a plane or travel the world. But it also might be important to you to expand your family, mend a broken relationship, buy a house, or live until you are 80. Having trouble getting started? Ask yourself: What would I want to experience or learn if I knew I only had one year to live?

Resources

500 Things to Do Before You Kick the Bucket (2010).

By Donald Vaughan, Christine A. Dallman, Christine Halvorson and Editors of Publications International Ltd.

The Greatest Book Of All Time: Personal Transformation Experience to Accomplish Everything on Your Bucket List, Create Your Legacy, & Have The Most Fun You've Ever Had in Any Year Of Your Life (2011). By Clint Arthur.

Memory Banking. Contact your local Extension Agent for more information about this life story program. Memory Banking is a 4-week program designed to increase participant's knowledge and skills to collect, document, and maintain life stories and health histories. The program is valuable for promoting an active brain, quality relationships, mental healthiness, and legacy building.

The Ultimate Bucket List: Over 100 Things Everyone Should Do Before They Die. (2011). By Jeffrey Fisher.

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