

Writing program with student interaction creates sense of purpose for seniors

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A unique program combining a life review writing workshop with conversations between seniors and college students enhances the sense of meaning in life for older adults living independently, finds a new study by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. The study is published in the July/August issue of the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

Americans are living longer than ever. The majority of [older adults](#) in our aging population want to remain in their own home or "age in place," as opposed to moving to housing for seniors or moving in with family members. Although physical function is important for community-dwelling seniors, mental health and well-being are also critical to their health and wellness.

Studies have shown that life review - a systematic review of life events from childhood to present day - has a positive effect on the mental health of older adults, especially when done in writing. Programs integrating younger generations with older adults have also been shown to be beneficial in enhancing seniors' [sense](#) of well-being, increasing intergenerational understanding, and decreasing depressive symptoms.

"A sense of purpose and meaning in life can affect disability status, cognitive function, and mortality among seniors," said study author Tracy Chippendale, assistant professor of [occupational therapy](#) at NYU Steinhardt. "Effective interventions that can influence something known to prevent cognitive loss and disability are important for helping people

to age in place."

Chippendale and her colleague studied the therapeutic benefits for community-dwelling seniors of the Living Legends program, which includes life review writing plus an interactive exchange between seniors and students, as compared with life review writing alone.

Thirty-nine seniors living at home were randomly assigned to a life review writing workshop or the workshop plus the intergenerational exchange. For eight weeks, Chippendale met weekly with seniors at senior centers and led them through the life review writing workshop, which included writing prompts, tips, and feedback.

After the workshop concluded, the older adults randomly selected to participate in the Living Legends program met with [college students](#) studying health sciences once a week for four weeks. In 90-minute sessions, the seniors read pieces of writing from the earlier workshop and took part in guided discussions with students about the content of their writing.

Using questionnaires and written responses, the researchers gathered information about the seniors and their sense of purpose before the writing workshop, after the workshop, and at the end of the Living Legends program.

The researchers observed a significant increase in the sense of purpose and meaning in life for seniors in the writing workshop plus the interactive exchange between students and seniors, but not for those in the writing workshop alone. The Living Legends program was particularly beneficial for older adults who had low initial scores for sense of purpose and meaning in life.

An analysis of the seniors' written responses revealed additional benefits.

The older adults found Living Legends to be a positive experience and felt that it promoted well-being, sharing, and learning. They also had positive views of the students, and valued the supportive environment provided by the program.

"Seniors expressed that the program gave them the opportunity to share their life adventures, create legacies, and inspire the next generation to examine their own lives. Their written responses shed light on the quantitative findings regarding enhanced sense of purpose and meaning in life," said Chippendale.

Although life review writing had previously been shown to have therapeutic benefits for [seniors](#), specifically a decrease in [depressive symptoms](#), the addition of the exchange with students offered them an enhanced sense of purpose and meaning in life.

"Given that purpose and meaning in life is an important factor with regard to preventing cognitive decline, disability, and mortality, the Living Legends program appears to be an effective health intervention, and may in turn help older adults remain at home longer," said Chippendale.

Provided by New York University

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