

# Storytelling allows elders to transfer values and meaning to younger generations

January 19 2023, by Mary Ann McColl

---



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If you spent time over the holidays with elderly relatives or friends, you may have heard many of the same stories repeated—perhaps stories you'd heard over the years, or even over the past few hours.

Repeated [storytelling](#) can sometimes be unnerving for friends and

families, raising concerns about a loved one's potential cognitive decline, memory loss or perhaps even the onset of dementia.

[Our research](#) at Queen's University suggests there is another way to think about repeated storytelling that makes it easier to listen and engage with the stories. We interviewed 20 middle-aged adults who felt they had heard the same stories over and over from their aging parent. We asked them to tell us those stories and we recorded and transcribed them.

We used a [narrative inquiry approach](#) to discover that repeated storytelling is a key method for elders to communicate what they believe to be important to their children and loved ones. Narrative inquiry uses the text of stories as [research data](#) to explore how people create meaning in their lives.

## **Transmitting values**

Based on nearly 200 collected stories, we found that there are approximately [10 stories](#) that older parents repeatedly tell to their adult children.

The hypothesis was that repeated storytelling was about inter-generational transmission of values. By exploring the themes of those repeated stories, we could uncover the meaning and messages elders were communicating to their loved ones.

The ultimate purpose was to offer a new and more constructive way of thinking about stories that we've heard many times before, and that can be otherwise perceived as alarming.

## **Here's what we have learned:**

1. There are typically just 10 stories that people tell repeatedly. While 10 is not a [magic number](#), it does seem to be about the right number to capture the stories that are told over and over. Interviewees felt that a set of approximately 10 allowed them to do justice to their parent's stories.
2. Among our interviewees, a significant number of their parents' stories—87%—took place when they were in their teens or twenties. A person's second and third decades are a time when they make many of the decisions that shape the rest of their lives; a time when values are consolidated and the [adult identity is formed](#)
3. What's important about the 10 stories is not the factual details, but the lesson that was learned, or the value that was reinforced—values like loyalty toward friends, putting family first, maintaining a sense of humor even in hard times, getting an education, speaking up against injustice, and doing what's right.
4. Key themes in the stories reflected the significant events and prevailing values of the early to mid-20th century. Many of the stories revolved around the war, and both domestic and overseas experiences that were formative. Many of our interviewees heard stories about immigrating to Canada, starting out with very little, seeking a better life and working hard. Stories often reflected a more formal time when it was important to uphold standards, make a good impression, know one's place and adhere to the rules.
5. The stories elders tell appear to be curated for the individual receiving them. They would be different if told to another child, a spouse or a friend.

## Tips for listening

Our [research](#) offers some tips for listening to stories from elders:

- Focus on just 10 stories. It can make the listening seem less overwhelming.
- Write them down. Writing challenges us to get the [story](#) straight.
- Notice your loved one's role in the story, as the message is often contained in that role.
- Be attentive to feelings, sensations, tension and discomfort. These can be signals or clues to the meaning of a story.
- Finally, remember these stories are for you—selected and told in the context of your relationship with your loved one. As such, they are a gift from a loved one who is running out of [time](#).

## The importance of receiving stories

Storytelling is an [essential human process](#) and a universal experience associated with aging. Neuroscientists suggest that storytelling has practical survival value for individuals and communities, [as well as social and psychological benefits](#).

It may be as powerful as medication or therapy for [overcoming depression among elders](#). Storytelling becomes especially important [when people become aware of their mortality](#)—when they are ill,

suffering or facing death.

People don't necessarily tell the same stories over and over again because they're losing cognitive function, but because the stories are important, and they feel we need to know them. Telling stories repeatedly isn't about forgetfulness or dementia. It's an effort to share what's important.

Our hope is that by better understanding elderly storytelling, caregivers may be able to listen in a different way to those repeated stories and understand the messages they contain. Those 10 stories can help us to know our loved one at a deeper level and assist our parent or grandparent with an important developmental task of old age.

This research offers a constructive way for caregivers to hear the repeated stories told by their aging parents, and to offer their loved one the gift of knowing they have been seen and heard.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Storytelling allows elders to transfer values and meaning to younger generations (2023, January 19) retrieved 24 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-01-storytelling-elders-values-younger-generations.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.