

Memories are the gift of a lifetime

We arrived at night and set up our tent in the dark and just crawled in and fell asleep. We were so tired from all that driving and fresh air. And then when we awakened in the morning we found that we were camped just next to a little stream.

I sat on the rocks and listened to the water flowing by and it just felt like everything was right: one of those moments when you feel really alive. And then a butterfly came and landed on my bare shoulder ... and I smiled, and turned my head carefully to look at it, and sat still until it flew away.

At the time I didn't try to remember that moment, but it comes back to me now and then. I remember it, and I always feel sort of happy again when it drifts into my mind.

Autobiographical memory is the memory that each of us has for the years, days and moments of our own unique life.

For the most part, we do not make a special point of remembering what happens to us as we walk through each day.

Despite putting no effort into trying to remember, we nevertheless do remember huge amounts of what has happened to us — and we are able to remember it for long periods of time.



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Of course, we can't remember everything. And sometimes when we most want to remember, we can't! That's normal. There are certain types of memory that sometimes show decline as people age, but research shows that autobiographical memory seems to be preserved well into later life.

So, memories of our lives are memories of a lifetime. Most people's earliest memories are from childhood, from as early as 2 or 3 years of age. Research suggests that people most frequently remember events and experiences from the time when they were about 10 until about age 30.

Sometimes our memories are vague and indistinct. Other times they are amazingly vivid. Often, we not only remember what happened, but we remember and recapture for a moment how we felt.

We may find ourselves reminiscing quietly, sometimes feeling bittersweet as we mull over past events and times in our life. Or we may laugh hilariously as we share our reminiscences with family and friends with whom we

have shared happy times.

In either case, the treasure is that we remember. Without trying, we have almost magically stored the events of a lifetime. Our memory has automatically written an autobiography, or life story, that we carry in our heads.

Thinking over our life story, or reminiscing, has been particularly associated with late life. Psychologists once believed that the tendency for older adults to think about and remember the past was due to an unwillingness to live in the present: It was a sign of mental deterioration. This view has now been completely revised. Autobiographical memory is now considered a resource to people of all ages!

This change in researchers' views of reminiscence and aging occurred for two reasons.

First, reminiscence is not something that only older adults do. Research shows that people of all ages, even kids as young as 5 years old, think about their life experiences and often share their memories with other people.

Older adults may certainly enjoy thinking about and sharing their life's experiences. But they are no more likely than younger people to "dwell on the past" instead of living in the

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present. This has led one psychologist, Brian de Vries, to claim, "individuals do not live in the past, the past lives in individuals." And having lived longer, older people have even more past to share!

Second, research has not found reminiscing to be linked to mental deterioration. In fact, in many cases the opposite is true!

Sharing life's experiences with others — including grandchildren and others of the next generation — and even writing one's memoirs or short stories about one's life are all now seen as positive ways both to maintain one's vitality and richen relationships in later life.

As a result of this new view of

reminiscence, many communities now have groups that assist older adults to "collect their life's memories" into written stories.

Psychologists and other researchers have studied memory for over 100 years. Although science has discovered a lot about how memory works, memory is also still one of the largest mysteries.

Autobiographical memory particularly poses a great challenge to me as a researcher.

How do people, sometimes in their 70s or 80s, still recall many events from their lifetime — even from childhood — without having ever made a real effort to "memorize" these events?

My research, and that of others, continues to uncover the secrets of how and why people are able to remember so much of their lives. But regardless of the answers that science provides, we can each, every day, enjoy the pleasures of the past through memory: I can still, from time to time, feel a butterfly land on my shoulder.

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