

## **8 Ways to Preserve Family Memories While You Can if Your Parent Has Alzheimer's**

An often-overlooked reality of Alzheimer's is that your parent's memories and knowledge of family history will eventually disappear along with her personality. Fortunately this doesn't happen instantly. Early in the disease process, even when short-term memory loss is obvious, long-term memories tend to persist. So now's the time to capture what she knows for future generations.

Before you're left with regrets that you don't know more about your parent's past, take steps to preserve them. This siren call to action is one of the few upsides to an Alzheimer's diagnosis. As you open a window into your parent's life, you might glean some useful insights into your family life -- and you'll surely enjoy these meaningful ways of spending quality time together now.

### **1. Record your parent reminiscing.**

Make a video of your parent responding to questions from you or another family member. Talking is usually easier for older parents than writing memories down, and you'll be glad later that you saved your parent's likeness and voice in addition to preserving family stories. Those cadences and styling quirks may seem indelibly familiar now, but the disease tends to erase them over time. You'll treasure having them on tape. So will relatives, so make copies and share.

Ask about her childhood, how she met and married, her jobs, thoughts about parenting, and opinions on matters big (whom she voted for and why) or small (her favorite singers or actors).

If your parent is nervous in front of a camera, have someone else surreptitiously do the recording or set up a tripod. She'll focus on you and the topics, and eventually forget that you're recording her. If she objects to any kind of filming, at least you can create an audio file.

### **Some guidelines for a more productive oral-history session:**

- Avoid questions with yes or no answers.
- Avoid interrupting; you may break her concentration.
- Supply encouraging murmurs (mmm-hmm, really, ah) as you would in a conversation.
- Try not to correct information you know is wrong. She may feel insulted and quit.
- Try to time the interview when your parent has her usual peak energy level in the day.
- Try not to press too hard. There may be topics or people she doesn't want to go into, so gently shift to a new line of questioning. Or she may not remember; if so, just move on.
- Keep a glass of water, tissues, and plenty of tape handy, so you won't have to stop the camera to fetch them if they're necessary.

### **2. Analyze and digitize old loose images.**

Those shoeboxes full of old black-and-white prints, the dusty albums you took possession of during a move, the slides no one has looked at in 20 years since the cumbersome slide projector broke -- they're a trove of memories just waiting to spring back to life.

First get them in shape for viewing. Many old family pictures from the 1970s and earlier were taken in 35mm slide format. Check under your parent's bed or on high closet shelves for those white plastic storage cases, round Kodak carousels, or pastel Opta-Vue cases from the 1940s and 1950s. Digitally scanning old slides and prints converts them into JPEG or TIFF formats, which you can then save onto CDs or DVDs or an external hard drive. You can do this at home

with a digital scanner or send them to a photo lab. If your parent has vision problems, she may enjoy the project more if she can view the enlarged images on a big computer screen.

While you're at it, preserve the images for the future. Digitizing all the images can be time-consuming and expensive, but it's worth at least weeding through them to select key images to scan, such as portraits. Digital archiving also allows you to make multiple copies of priceless old photos and documents -- wise in the event of a fire or other disaster. You'll also save these images from the natural ravages of time, such as fading, discoloration, or mold.

Ideally, relocate the vintage originals into archival-quality albums or photo boxes. (Look for acid-free paper or cardboard). If you don't have time, whatever you do, remove them from the film-covered pages of old "magnetic" albums, which are highly acidic and hasten deterioration.

Be sure to transfer old home movies -- your parents' wedding, your first steps, that family trip to Disneyland -- to DVD as well.

Now you're ready to enlist your parent's help in sorting, identifying, and dating the old photos. Even if she's fuzzy on the details, she's apt to recognize more old faces than you are, or she can help you sort out piles loosely divided by era. Make notes lightly in pencil on the backs of photos or underneath images in albums. Start with a handful at a time so as not to overwhelm her.

### **3. Pore over photo albums, old and new.**

Turn off the TV set on your next visit and pull out the old family album instead. Ask prompts as you go: Who is that? What happened to him? What's happening here?

Don't rely on your own memory -- jot down the stories you're told and add them to the album later. Under the pictures, write down the names of people in the photos and their relationships, even those you don't think you'll forget. You're also preserving history for your own children and grandchildren.

In some families the volume of albums is overwhelming. You could make a great gift for your parent and your relatives by culling selected pictures and creating a customized photo book. These feature digital images printed right onto the pages of a hardbound or spiral-bound book. Pull together an overview of your parent's life or just one portion (her childhood, time in the service, a particular trip or job). Check out Kodak Gallery, Shutterfly, Snapfish, and Apple for resources. If you or a relative is an ace cropper, you can also turn old photos into scrapbooks that serve a similar purpose.

### **4. Buy a fill-in-the-blank memory book.**

Parents who enjoy writing but lack the confidence or ability to stick to a narrative might welcome a ready-made memory book, which is full of prompts with spaces for answers. Sold at bookstores and gift shops, some memory books are general while others focus on childhood, marriage, or Christmas and other celebrations. A parent who's resistant about dredging up childhood memories for you might enjoy filling in a memory book intended as a gift for her grandchildren.

## **5. Fill in your family tree.**

If the genealogy bug hasn't already bitten you, you'll soon discover that tracing your family history through the generations has never been easier, thanks to simple software programs such as Legacy, Family Tree Maker, and Ancestral Quest. Among the kinds of details your parents may know -- but never had reason to mention before -- are maiden names, long-lost cousins, and relatives who died young.

## **6. Travel to your parent's hometown.**

Baby boomers' parents were the last generation to grow up in such vast numbers not in suburbs but in small towns and on farms. For a parent, a visit to a hometown can make for a memorable multigenerational vacation. For your parent, this may be a last opportunity to "go home again," while for you and your children, it's like having a tour guide to the past. There's no substitute for seeing a place through your parent's eyes and listening to her stories with friends and relatives who may still be there.

## **7. Learn the stories of things.**

Photographs naturally attract the most emphasis as memory prods, but don't overlook the objects in your parent's home. Stories also abound in those things that have been around so long we've ceased to notice them. Talk to your parent about her collection of souvenir spoons, the knickknacks on a shelf or dresser, or the contents of a cedar chest. Why did she save these particular things? What was their appeal? When were they obtained and where did they come from? The object can be a springboard to anecdotes you may never have heard before.

Emphasize to your parent that you're not asking to have these objects. You're just curious about the stories behind them. If your parent is amenable, you could even jot down pertinent details about source or age on a bit of masking tape on the bottom of each object so that no one forgets.

## **8. Get "famous" family recipes down on paper.**

Recipes are another type of heirloom, often overlooked until it's Thanksgiving and suddenly you and your siblings realize that nobody knows the secret ingredient in your mom's acclaimed cake or your dad's trademark barbecue sauce. The foods families share are often composed as much of tradition, religion, and travel as they are of flour or salt.

If she's still able to do so, ask your mom to make her favorite dish while you write down (or record on video) what she does step-by-step.

Take the idea a step farther and create a family cookbook including the signature dishes of all your aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings as well as your parents -- the special foods associated with reunions, birthdays, and other family gatherings.

**Courtesy and source:** <http://www.caring.com/checklists/ways-to-preserve-family-memories>