

this is me.

Alzheimer's Identity Book



Dementia is generally any type of memory loss, short term or long term, which occurs as a result of a stroke, an infection, vascular issues, or other issues. Alzheimer's is a disease that almost always results with symptoms that include dementia and usually interferes with one's memory and behavior. It is the most common form of dementia. In the United States alone more than 5 million people are living with Alzheimer's.

Memories are precious to all of us. We carry them with us no matter where life takes us. Memories are what shape a person, but when someone is affected with Alzheimer's these memories fade or get distorted. A person begins to lose everything, from family and friends to childhood memories and favorite things. This is heartbreaking for not only the patient, but also their loved ones who must watch as they are slowly stripped of their memories and ultimately their identity. Currently, there is no known cure for the disease, so it is crucial to find some way to help both the patient and the loved ones to cope

with this disease. Sharing memories in the form of photos and stories has proven to be an effective activity that can help victims of Alzheimers to cope.

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A simple photo album can be incredibly helpful throughout all stages. Photographs help trigger memories and stimulate the mind. In the early stages of Alzheimer's, the photos, along with some journaling, can help comfort an Alzheimer's patient when they become confused. In the later stages, when even the most fundamental memories become out of reach, the album serves as an "identity book" to remind themselves and those around of who they are and many of the people and past times they once loved.

STEP ONE: Collecting Contents

When creating an identity book, the first step is to collect photos to put in the book. This is the most time-consuming part of the process as it usually involves not only collecting the photos, but identifying the associated information that may be pertinent to your loved one's memory. Here are three important tips:

- Start the process of collecting early so the book can complete the book within your desired timeframe needs.
- Label all photos as this will make the journaling and communicating with your loved one easier and more effective.
- Every photo chosen should be cropped to focus on the main subject and to eliminate distractions.

Some photos to consider including are:

- baby photo (with date and place of birth)
- siblings
- pets
- school photo (with information about when and where they went to school)
- honeymoon photo
- photos of their hobbies or interests
- grandchildren (with information about their interests)
- recent family photos
- favorite vacation spots
- grandparents and parents
- childhood homes
- close friends
- photos from their career
- wedding photo
- photos from important vacations or other events
- children (childhood, wedding, etc.)
- birthdays, anniversaries, etc.
- photos from important events

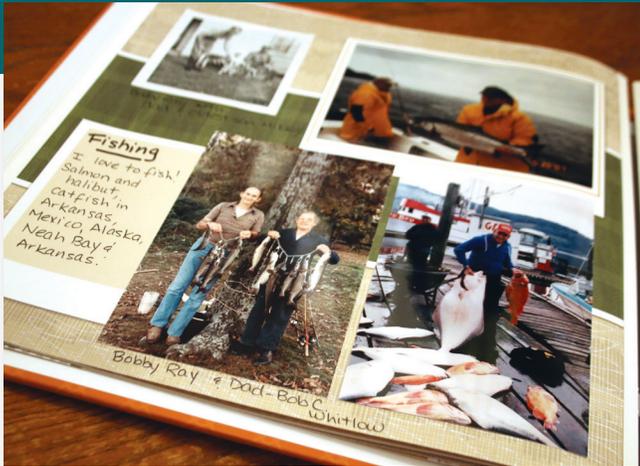
STEP TWO: Formatting and Organizing

The next step is choosing a format and laying out the book. An identity book can take many forms: a traditional photo album, a digital photo book, a slide in album, anything that allows you to compile pictures and text in a convenient and organized manner. Once you have chosen a format for your book you will need to put the photos in some sort of order. Generally, chronological order is best. Start from their childhood and work your way up to recent years. However, it is also helpful to group certain pictures together. For example, give each of their children and each of their grandchildren their own page, group all photos of childhood homes on a page together, and create a page which shows their hobbies and interests. Find a single photo to use for the first page or cover. This can either be a recent individual photo of the loved one, or it may be a recent family photo.



STEP THREE: Assembling

Now you are ready to put the book together. Start from the beginning and work your way through the book. If using original photos, as opposed to copies, and doing a traditional scrapbook, as opposed to digital, you may want to mount the photos in a way which allows you to take them out of the book and put them back in (such as photo corners or photo sleeves). This not only prevents the photos from getting damaged, it also allows for coming back later to look at any notes made on the back. This would be when some subtle embellishments such as a solid colored border or a themed sticker or two could be added. Just remember to keep it simple.



STEP FOUR: Journaling

The last step is to add journaling. Keep it simple and concise, but make sure each picture has some sort of caption. In most cases a single sentence, or even just a word or two, is enough to trigger a memory. "My sister Anne" between two photos (perhaps one childhood photo and one recent) is just enough to give the photo some context and familiarity. This is also where their previous comments could be included. For example, "She had the most beautiful laugh, and I knew from the start she was the one for me," or if, when showed a photo of their childhood home they recall, "I loved walking down the street to go fishing in the creek with my brother," place this beside a picture of the house. You may consider leaving some pages blank so that additional photos may be added as more memories are created.

Once you have put the book together decide when and how to present the book. Consider giving the patient the book on a milestone birthday or anniversary, but keep in mind that it is best to show them the book earlier rather than later. Don't wait for them to lose their memory, in fact it is best for them to see the book while they are still able to remember some of the people and moments. This allows them to make a connection with the book before the memories are lost.

Putting the book together can be a great experience for everyone involved.

The three most important things to remember when creating the book are:

1. *Involve as much of the family as possible. Putting the book together can be a great experience for everyone involved, and it offers a way for everyone to celebrate and hold onto the life of their loved one. If possible, involve your loved one as well. Have them share what they can remember, but avoid asking direct questions because it can be frustrating and embarrassing for them if they cannot remember.*

2. *Always include text. Every photo that goes into the book should be accompanied by at least a few words which state what is shown in the photo. Often times Alzheimer's patients will become confused or even frightened by photos when they cannot remember who the people in the pictures are. Names, dates, and places are all appropriate forms of journaling. Keep in mind that larger text size may be necessary as many elderly people struggle with vision problems. Also keep in mind, that as the disease progresses, your loved one will not be able to understand or even read what is written, but this information is still essential so that a caregiver can assist with the activity of looking through the book.*

3. *Keep it simple. It is important not to overwhelm the person with too much information, but it is also important not to include excess embellishment. While some minor embellishments can make the book more aesthetically pleasing, too much decoration can be distracting.*





"When I first presented the book to my dad he seemed a little confused and was not exactly sure what it was. Given his advanced stage of dementia, anything new was confusing. My mother simply placed it on the coffee table in the family room so it was convenient for him to pick up should he decide to do so. It did not take long before he started flipping the pages and asking questions about the people in the pictures. On many occasions, he would begin to reminisce and tell us stories about events or people that were featured in the book.



...that memory book still sits on the coffee table. I find myself unconsciously picking it up every time I visit my mom. Even though the intended purpose was to provide my dad with some comfort, it now serves as a comfort to us."

– Karen Lewis, who created a memory book for her father



RECLAIMING MEMORIES

Alzheimer's is one of the most common diseases among senior citizens. The amount of stress that it places on both the patient and their loved ones is unimaginable. Since there is no known cure, the most important thing to do is to find a way to cope with the loss of memory. Memory loss is tragic, often leaving patients lost and confused. An identity book presents memories in an easy, readily available manner. By giving one back these memories, even for a moment, you are giving them a sense of identity, and this will also give them a better sense of security and belonging.

<http://www.brightfocus.org/alzheimers/livingwith/everydaylife.html>
http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_what_is_alzheimers.asp
<http://www.alz.org/what-is-dementia.asp>

