

## **Therapeutic/Restorative Biographies (TR-Bios)** *Adapted from “The Creative Age” (2001)*

Therapeutic/Restorative Biographies (TR-Bios)<sup>™</sup> are video biographies designed to structure quality time for persons with significant memory impairment—especially those with Alzheimer’s disease. They are also designed to make it easier for family, friends, and volunteers to visit with memory impaired individuals. They were developed in a research project conducted by Gene D. Cohen, M.D., Ph.D. Dr. Cohen is Director of the Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at the George Washington University in Washington, DC. The project was funded by the Helen Bader Foundation from Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

This short-form how-to statement has been adapted from an in depth discussion of the technique and process as found in Dr. Cohen’s book “The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life”, published in hard cover by AVON Books in March 2000; it is also available in paperback, published by Quill (Harper Collins), 2001.

### **Producing a TR-Bio** **by Gene D. Cohen, M.D., Ph.D.**

The objective is to produce a video tape that contains videotaped photos that are accompanied by commentary provided by a relative or friend who knows the memory impaired individual well.

A convenient video camera to use is an 8mm or Hi8 (the later having yet better resolution, though both are very good). These are small cameras, facilitating ease of use. Their film is easily converted to a VHS format for standard VCRs; instruction for how to do this are in the manual that comes with your camera. We’ll return to this in our discussion of editing later on. Digital video cameras are also being increasingly used.

The process begins with the family organizing interesting photos that they think have a chance of capturing the attention of their loved one with memory impairment.

- Look for pictures that are in focus and seem in pretty good shape.
- Look for pictures that have special meaning for your loved one.
- Look for pictures that relate to pockets of memory that they still seem to have—topics or time periods where their memory seems better in tact.
- Look for pictures of people, events, scenes, and objects that you think they might know better than other pictures.
- Arrange the pictures chronologically.

Then place the camera on a tripod and place a photo on some kind of a holder or makeshift stand. You can come up very close to the photo—sometimes within an inch or two away; when you focus in very close you may have to shift from automatic mode to manual mode. These cameras don’t need much light, so a room reasonably lighted typically works fine. By coming up close to the picture, even small images can fill the TV screen and are appealingly transformed from their original state.

Once focused on the photo, press the record button on the camera, and have the narrator start talking about the image until you signal him/her to stop. Then turn the record mode off and set up a new photo for narration. Thirty minutes of such filming is very good, with most starting off between 15 to 45 minutes. Over time, keep adding to the process, and in the end you will have a wonderful family biography—a gift that in effect has been initiated by your loved one with memory trouble.

Be creative in your filming. My father who had Alzheimer's disease enjoyed discussions about his time in the navy. I found a photo of the ship he sailed on in his scrapbook. It was part of a newspaper article with text around the image. I zoomed the camera in so that it focused only on the ship. Then I rocked the camera so that it made the ship appear to be sailing at sea. And we turned on an audio tape that played "Anchors Away" for special sound effects. We also added narration explaining that this was my father's ship in the navy. He was all smiles when he saw it.

You don't have to just film photos. You can film family and friends live, talking to your loved one as if they were on a video visit to them. If you are good at editing, you can also incorporate old movie films or have a place in town that specializes in this help you convert old movies to a VHS format. Alternatively, DVDs can also be produced.

*The instruction manual that comes with your camera will tell you how to do simple editing in transferring the images from your video camera to the VCR.* These cameras come with attachments that allow you to plug into your VCR directly from the camera and convert the 8mm or Hi8 film to a VHS format to use in standard VCRs.

A "4-head" as opposed to a 2-head VCR is recommended. The greater number of "heads" then allows you to put the VCR on pause without causing a fuzzy image; hence, you can freeze-frame the image without distortion. When you come to an image that seems to tap into memories more effectively, the VCR can be placed on pause to enable as much discussion of the picture as possible. This also extends the length of your film.

I use a combined 13 inch TV/VCR. It is mobile, and can be placed on a table right in front of your loved one, similarly to a person sitting close by for conversation. Images of people's faces that fill the screen then are essentially life size. Of course, any TV and VCR can be used.

When showing the videotape to your loved one, the object is not to grill them with too many questions—this could be very frustrating. The goal is to have a comfortable time together. If they have trouble recognizing the image, don't keep on asking who is that or saying, "come on, you know!". Tell them who it is; say, "Look, it's your brother Bob, what a great picture of him". Make it easy for them and for yourselves.

That's it in brief, *for now*. Good luck, and have a wonderful time together.