

GRANDFATHER'S STORY CLOTH

Discussion Questions/Answers

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While children will enjoy reading Grandfather's Story Cloth on their own, we also suggest sharing the experience with the guidance of an adult who can answer questions and initiate discussion. To assist adults in the interactive learning process with the child, here is a list of questions with corresponding answers focused on enhancing understanding of the behavioral and psychological symptoms of Grandfather and Alzheimer's disease. These in-depth answers give adults a broader base of knowledge about the book, and they in turn can discuss the ideas at the child's level of understanding.

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Why is Grandfather able to remember life experiences from his past but not able to remember simpler things like turning the water off at the bathroom sink?

Alzheimer's disease interferes with memory. Usually the person's remote or long-term memory remains intact long after they lose their short-term memory, such as their ability to remember what happened earlier in the day or sometimes even 10 minutes ago.

Why did Father build a fence in the back yard?

Persons who have Alzheimer's disease may wander away and forget how to find their way back home. There are also many ways that a confused elder could get hurt while walking alone outside. For example, the elder could walk in front of a moving car and become seriously injured. Grandfather enjoyed the outdoors. While living in Laos he spent much of his day working in the fields enjoying the fresh air and sunshine. Father built a tall "privacy" fence that enclosed the backyard so that Grandfather could continue to be outside and work in his garden without wandering away and endangering himself. However, it should be noted that despite the fence Grandfather should never be left at home by himself.

What are some other safety measures that could be taken to help Grandfather?

Grandfather's environment can be modified to make it safer for him to function during periods of confusion. For example, Chersheng and Tou should keep their toys picked up off the floor so Grandfather does not trip. Potentially toxic substances such as medicine and cleaning fluids should be kept in a secured area that Grandfather does not have access to. A special device can be placed on the front door to prevent Grandfather from leaving the house and wandering off on his own.

Why was Grandfather gathering branches in the backyard?

In Laos Grandfather had lived in a house of wood and bamboo with an earthen floor. Women cooked over a small fire on the earthen floor inside the house. Grandfather was confused and thought he was in Laos and needed to collect wood for the cooking fire

What is the best approach to take when Grandfather forgets to turn the water off?

Forgetting to turn the water off did not jeopardize Grandfather's safety or the safety of anyone in the family. It is likely that Grandfather will not remember that he left the water running. It is usually best to simply turn the water off without creating a scene and upsetting Grandfather or making him feel bad.

With experience what did Chersheng learn to do when Grandfather started talking about things that didn't make sense?

Persons with Alzheimer's disease often become confused. Minor confusion that does not pose a danger to the elder or others can sometimes be redirected by focusing the elder's attention to another topic that interests them.

Which of Grandfather's behaviors was most upsetting to Chersheng? How did Chersheng deal with these feelings?

Following a nightmare, Grandfather mistook Chersheng for his older brother (Fong) who died many years ago in Laos. Chersheng was deeply hurt when his Grandfather did not recognize him. Chersheng enjoyed drawing and had always found comfort in his art, so he ran to his room and drew a picture of himself and his grandfather. He drew them as their relationship had been before the onset of Alzheimer's disease and as he wanted their relationship to continue. It was also very important that he share his feelings with his mother so that she could help him.

Chersheng used the story cloth to elicit Grandfather's remote memory. How did this activity benefit both Chersheng and Grandfather?

Traditionally, storytelling has been an important part of the Hmong culture. Stories were passed from one generation to the next. The story cloth provided an opportunity for Grandfather to tell Chersheng about his life in Laos and the events leading to their family's arrival in America. This gave Chersheng the opportunity to learn things about Grandfather that sometimes seemed hidden or lost because of the disease. Chersheng also learned about Grandfather's courage during the war and the sacrifices that he had made for his family. This provided Chersheng with a deeper understanding and respect for Grandfather.

The story cloth also gave Chersheng something tangible to hold and look at during the times when Grandfather became confused and Chersheng felt that he had "lost" his grandfather.

How did Chersheng's response to Grandfather's behaviors differ from Tou's response? How did Chersheng try to help Tou?

Because Chersheng was older and remembered Grandfather before the onset of Alzheimer's disease, he was more respectful. Since he was older he also recognized that there were things that he could do to promote Grandfather's well-being.

- He interacted with Grandfather in a loving and respectful manner
- He tried to be patient with Grandfather
- He learned the importance of having Grandfather share his memories from Laos
- He was alert to factors that might jeopardize Grandfather's safety
- He asked for Grandfather's advice about the appropriate time to harvest vegetables.
- He was creative in using his art as a means of helping Grandfather's memory of family events since arriving in America

Chersheng was protective of Grandfather and became frustrated with Tou when Tou was disrespectful of Grandfather. Chersheng showed Tou Grandfather's story cloth in an effort to help him achieve a greater appreciation of Grandfather.

When Tou's blanket got wet, Chersheng told him to, "stop being a baby." Why did Chersheng say this?

Chersheng was protective of Grandfather and did not want Tou to upset Grandfather. Even though the blanket was "soaked" it would dry and Tou would have it back again. In contrast, Grandfather's memory was affected by Alzheimer's disease and would not be getting better.

Why did Mother prepare a special soup for Grandfather made of bitter melon?

Bitter melon is a vegetable that the Hmong grew in Laos and continue to grow in their gardens in America. Just like the name implies, it has a bitter taste. Young people do not generally like the flavor of this vegetable but elders do. Mother made the soup as a gesture of love and respect for Grandfather. Bitter melon is also believed to be highly nutritious and beneficial to the eyes, stomach, lungs, liver, and bladder.

Why was Grandfather digging in the garden?

In Laos, a portion of the family's wealth was secured in silver bars. During the war the Hmong would bury these silver bars for safe-keeping. Today, these silver bars are valued by Hmong families for good-luck, used during spiritual ceremonies, and given to couples upon marriage. Grandfather was confused and thought that he was in Laos and was burying a silver bar in an effort to protect his family's wealth.

Look carefully at the back of Grandfather's shirt. What do you see?

Pieces of cloth have been appliquéd to the back of Grandfather's shirt. This is an indication that Grandfather has had a special ceremony performed by a shaman in an effort to restore his health and extend his life.

What was the significance of the story collage that Chersheng made for Grandfather?

After Grandfather shared his memories of living in Laos, Chersheng hoped that Grandfather was getting better. The next day, when Chersheng found Grandfather in the backyard, he initially thought that Grandfather was tending his garden as he had done so many times before. However, after Chersheng's mother explained Grandfather's behavior, Chersheng came to the painful realization that Grandfather would not be getting better. Chersheng dealt with his feelings, as he had earlier in the story, by focusing on his art. But this time it was different. Chersheng wanted to use his art to help Grandfather. Chersheng used an adapted version of the Hmong story cloth to preserve and share his memories of life in America with Grandfather, allowing Chersheng to reflect on the happy times that he shared with Grandfather before he developed Alzheimer's disease. He gave the story collage as a gift to Grandfather in hopes that it would help elicit these same happy memories in Grandfather. He also did this in an effort to restore Grandfather's memories of life in America. More importantly, Chersheng did this as an expression of love for his grandfather.