

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# What Your Most Vivid Memories Say About You

*How self-defining memories shape your identity*

By Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D.  
From Psychology Today • 2012

*What makes up a person's identity? Some scientists would say it's a person's genes—the traits that are passed down by a person's mother and father. Other people might say it's a person's reputation. In "What Your Most Vivid Memories Say About You," Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D., has a different take on what makes a person who they are. As you read, look for evidence to answer this question: Where does identity come from?*

- [1] In many ways, our memories define our sense of self. You are able to have a sense of identity because you know that you are the same person you were yesterday and will undoubtedly be the same person tomorrow. In its most basic form, your identity is the recognition that you are "Mary," and not "Anne." You first become aware of your own identity early in life, perhaps as young as 18 months, when you recognize that the toddler you see in the mirror is really you, and not another child. As you progress through childhood and into adolescence, you start to develop a cohesive<sup>1</sup> set of schemas, or views, about your identity. These include ideas about how your body looks and performs, your abilities and personality, your place in society, and the way you believe you are perceived by other people.



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By the time we reach adolescence, we should have carved out at least a tentative sense of identity. Between adolescence and early adulthood, we refine this identity as we explore different options with regard to our roles and values. We also start to develop a vision of our future life, or what I call the "scenario." As events unfold in our lives, we then start to create our own first-person accounts about the events we have encountered, or what I call the "life story."

Our identities become shaped by our life stories as we gradually incorporate the memories of the events in our lives into our sense of self (Whitbourne, 1985). The most important of these, the "self-defining memories," are the ones that we remember most vividly<sup>2</sup> and that contribute most heavily to our overall sense of self. A self-defining memory is also easily remembered, and emotionally intense. In some cases, these memories represent ongoing themes that we play out over and over again in our lives.

1. **Cohesive** (*adjective*): characterized by or causing cohesion; unified  
2. **Vividly** (*adverb*): strongly or distinctly

Learning to recognize your own self-defining memories can help you gain important insights about your identity. The easiest way to find out your own self-defining memories is by thinking about the events in your life that you are most likely to tell people about when they say “Tell me a little about yourself.” Chances are that you’ll start by saying something about your job status, interests, relationships, and favorite things to do. As the conversation unfolds, you’ll probably elaborate with a few anecdotes<sup>3</sup> that illustrate these facts about yourself and your life. The anecdotes that bubble up to the top of your memory are likely to contain at least some elements of your self-defining memories. It’s quite likely that you’ll try to avoid the TMI effect (“too much information”), especially when you’re meeting a stranger. However, the deeper memories that these anecdotes tap into are the ones that most likely will fit the criteria<sup>4</sup> for being self-defining.

- [5] The formal measure of self-defining memories, developed by Blagov and Singer (2004), involves two steps. First, participants list the 5-10 memories from their own experience that are the most important, most vivid, carry the most emotional meaning, are linked to other memories, and tend to be thought about the most often. Then they ask participants to rate these memories along a set of emotional dimensions. You can take a simplified version of this test by generating one or two (though you could do 5) memories of vivid and important events from your life. Then you can rate them according to these 3 criteria:

**Specificity:** A highly specific memory refers to one event that had a relatively brief duration (such as a particularly enjoyable evening with friends). A nonspecific memory describes a lengthy episode (such as the prolonged illness of a relative). A generic memory refers to a set of similar events that happen repeatedly (such as yearly family picnics).

**Meaning:** An integrative memory is one in which you make meaning out of an event (such as growing emotionally following the death of a relative). A non-integrative memory is one that you haven’t particularly interpreted for yourself or seen yourself as growing from.

**Emotions:** A positive memory is one that makes you feel happy, proud, and interested. A negative memory makes you feel sad, angry, fearful, shamed, disgusted, guilty, embarrassed, and contemptful.

As you look at these memories, you probably notice that they fall into specific content areas. The typical areas that people mention include relationships, mortality (life-threatening events), leisure, and achievement or mastery. However, because self-defining memories are a fluid part of your identity, constantly changing as you experience more events, the content of your self-defining memories may vary according to your age and current life concerns.

- [10] In an intriguing study, Connecticut College psychologist Jefferson Singer and his colleagues (2007) compared older adults with college students on self-defining memories. They found that older adults tended to come up with more general memories that linked several events together and that, in general, older adults tended to feel more positively about their self-defining memories, even if the memories were of events that were negative in nature. These findings fit with other lines of research suggesting that older adults have found ways to make sense out of their life stories. They convert memories of troubling events into stories of redemption in which they make peace with their past struggles. For younger adults, events of a negative nature had more rough edges, causing them to experience greater distress when they recalled them.

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3. **Anecdote** (*noun*): a short account of a particular incident or event; a personal story

4. **Criteria** (*noun*): a principle or standard by which something may be evaluated or decided

A self-defining memory does not have to be positive in order for you to grow from it. In fact, many studies that look at these so-called “narratives” that people construct out of their lives suggest that it’s not the event, but the meaning you make out of the event, that affects your sense of wellbeing. This means that the more you are able to talk about the meaning you derived<sup>5</sup> from an event, the more likely it is that you’ll be able to grow and elaborate<sup>6</sup> your sense of identity. On the other hand, the less specific your memories, the more likely it is that whatever is causing you to forget those details may also be inhibiting<sup>7</sup> your growth. For example, none of us likes to think of events in which we acted in ways that now cause us to feel ashamed. Perhaps you had far too much to drink at a family event, and made a fool out of yourself in front of your nearest and dearest. By trying to find the meaning in this event (you realized that you need to cut back on your alcohol use and did), you can integrate<sup>8</sup> that event into your life story rather than pretending it didn’t happen at all.

In a future article, I plan to discuss the neurological underpinnings<sup>9</sup> of these self-defining memories, and how your thoughts of the past shape your ability to think about the future. For now, however, figuring out your self-defining memories is an important step in coping with your life experiences. By recognizing and making sense out of past events, your identity can continue to grow and enhance your self-esteem and happiness, both now, and in the future.

### References:

- Blagov, P. S., & Singer, J. A. (2004). Four Dimensions of Self-Defining Memories (Specificity, Meaning, Content, and Affect) and Their Relationships to Self-Restraint, Distress, and Repressive Defensiveness. *Journal of Personality*, 72(3), 481-511.
- Singer, J., Rexhaj, B., & Baddeley, J. (2007). Older, wiser, and happier? Comparing older adults' and college students' self-defining memories. *Memory*, 15(8), 886-898.
- Whitbourne, S. K.(1985).The psychological construction of the life span.In J. E. Birren & K. W. Schaie (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of aging, 2nd Ed.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

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5. **Derive (verb):** to obtain or receive
  6. **Elaborate (verb):** to expand or add details to; to work out carefully
  7. **Inhibit (verb):** to prevent or hinder
  8. **Integrate (verb):** to bring parts together to form a whole; to combine
  9. **Underpinning (noun):** a foundation or basis

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What is the thesis of this article? Cite evidence from the text. [RI.2] [RI.1]

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2. What is the “scenario” Dr. Krauss Whitbourne mentions in paragraph 2? Why is it included, and why is it important to self-perception (even though it is not technically a memory)? [RI.5]

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3. According to the text, what is a “self-defining memory”? Cite evidence in your answer. [RI.4] [RI.1]

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4. For this exercise, please review paragraphs 5-9. Below, list 2-3 important memories [RI.3] and categorize them by specificity (highly specific, non-specific, or generic), meaning (integrative or non-integrative), and emotions. Be sure to reflect upon them: Why are they significant to you? How do the memories of these events shape your identity?

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5. A "self-defining memory" has to be positive: True or False? Why or why not? [RI.1]

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## Discussion Questions

***Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.***

1. Besides memories, what makes a person who they are? Use evidence from this text, from your own experience, and from other art or literature to answer this question.