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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on some special concerns of the elderly such as employment issues, retirement, problems of aging, and continuing education, and discusses ways counselors can help. (BH)

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Older Adults: Counseling Issues

Increased numbers of older people and a continued lengthening of the life span signal the need for an expansion of counseling services to a population often overlooked—the older adult. While the elderly account for 25% of what the nation spends on health care, they are underrepresented in receiving psychological aid. Older adults are healthier and better educated than ever before, concerned about the quality of life as well as the length of it. This digest focuses on some of the special concerns of the elderly and ways counselors can help.

The Risks of Getting Older

A number of role transitions and losses heighten the vulnerability of the older person—children leaving home, career change, retirement, death of a spouse, isolation, and institutionalization. A deficit in personal resources and/or coping skills may mean a need for counseling services.

Certain groups show potential for higher counseling needs, including the sick and disabled, the disadvantaged, minorities, prisoners, substance abusers, homosexuals, and the single or widowed.

Vocational Counseling

Many older adults cannot afford to retire or choose not to do so. The problem of unemployment or underemployment for older workers is significant. In addition to difficulties facing any job seeker, older workers encounter discriminatory practices, stereotypical attitudes, changes in their abilities, and their own negative self-image. Self-defeating attitudes and behaviors need to be addressed before successful job placement can occur; a good counselor-client relationship is crucial to the outcome.

Pre-Retirement Counseling

Retirement is a critical and often traumatic event that may result in restlessness rather than rest. Many experts find current pre-retirement programs too narrow in scope. A holistic approach would include help with:

- Using current resources for future needs.
- Using leisure meaningfully, either in pursuit of hobbies, part time work, volunteer activities, sociopolitical activism, or in reflection and contemplation.
- Wills and estate planning.
- Continuing education.
- Obtaining housing, health and safety.
- Establishing and maintaining relationships.

Research has shown that many workers are reluctant to participate in these programs, believing they signal extinction. But this trend is beginning to change and most large corporations now offer some sort of pre-retirement program. Counselors have an important role in giving information, suggesting meaningful options, and providing opportunities for voicing concerns. Counselors need to examine their own biases and show a special sensitivity to the fact that anxiety about retirement often is really anxiety about aging.

Education and Older Students

Older students face many of the same barriers and stereotypes that older workers do. Education in later life can be enjoyed for its own sake as well as for updating job skills or learning leisure pursuits. Many colleges allow older students to audit classes free, on a space-available basis, and provide classes in the community, often taught by volunteer retirees.

Contrary to many expectations, most older students are highly motivated and do well academically. Their experiences and vitality are often beneficial to younger students. While many elders have no problem adjusting, special considerations may be needed in terms of lighting, parking, security, study guides and outlines, and provisions for hearing or vision deficiencies.

Concerns About Seeking Help

Older persons are often reluctant to seek help and view counseling with doubt, suspicion and anxiety. They often rely on other professionals such as the family physician or minister, or their own support network of family and friends.

Group Counseling

Group counseling can neutralize some of the potential problems of traditional one-to-one counseling, such as the counselor's own unresolved feelings toward aging and death, as well as age bias. Group counseling encourages supportive sharing and social interaction which may help replace lost family or work contacts. The elderly can share past experiences denied to younger persons and reinforce appropriate social roles of aging. Peer counseling programs are often effective.

Implications for Counseling

Counseling the elderly most often requires a holistic approach—consistent with lifestyle counseling. Older persons often have simultaneous counseling needs, but some concerns, like elder abuse, may not be immediately mentioned as a problem. Counselors should treat older clients with respect:

- Emphasizing their strengths, not weaknesses.
- Developing independence while diminishing dependence.
- Encouraging decision making and action taking.

Millions of older adults are living in various stages of health, happiness and ability. They are more different from each other than are members of any other age group and must be treated as individuals.

Counseling the elderly is a field that promises new and exciting challenges for counselors as well as the promise of a more satisfying, meaningful life for America's older citizens.

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List of resources available upon request.

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