

Health/ Mental of older people

SW566

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Introduction

The two people I interviewed both have led their life very actively and optimistically. Laura, a Chinese-Irish American, has three daughters, and lives with her husband in Bellevue. She has been a medical social worker through her life. She leads a very busy life and always keeps a thankful attitude toward everything she faces. The optimistic and active attitude grants her a fruitful life everyday. Neil, a Vietnamese immigrant, lives alone in a senior house. His wife is disabled and lives with their daughter in a nearby area. By living alone, he can concentrate on his studies, and totally relax after a busy work day. Absorbing knowledge, learning new things, and being together with young people are the privileges Laura and Neil think they are lucky enough to have.

Laura

Laura, a seventy-six year old Chinese-Irish American, has been a social worker for all her life. She has three daughters, and now lives with her husband.

“Do I feel my age?” Laura expressed that at times she does feel her age when she picks up the garbage can that is heavy and has to be carried to the road. She knows the pain in the back or groin wasn't there ten years ago. Most recently she has been suffering from her slipped disks. But for the most part, she has not spent her time dwelling on her age. She doesn't have the time. “There is so much to learn and so much to do.” She has been fortunate to be in fairly good health. This does not mean that she does not have diseases that many people of her age have. But she has

been trained in preventive medicine, and had the good fortune of being able to have access to good medical care. She had TB as a child, and was taught to pace herself. She has tried to be active mentally, keeping herself involved with what's going on in the world. She has tried to be as positive about life as possible, knowing that there is so much to be done. And she is grateful for all the wonderful people she has met who have been kind and sharing with her. She tries to return their goodness. She believes that people are all dependent on each other. She and her husband both believe in giving back to society, and her husband has often said that when he gets into "that box", he will only need one shirt.

She has also done a lot of volunteer work. Whenever people need her, she will do her best to offer her help. She also assisted at a nursing home in its planning stage by being asked to volunteer as a social worker. Though they did not need the money at home, it was many years before she took paid vacation or paid sick leave. However, "it has been worth it!" She is thankful to see the nursing home is thriving and the elderly have a place, and is still humble to say, "there are many people who did more than I did."

She is always interested in hearing what plans young people are formulating for their future. She always tells people that life is full of unexpected twists and turns; and life does not always come out the way one wishes. She thinks if the adjustments are so great that one is deeply affected negatively, then one must think about it carefully.

She has also signed up for a course at the UW, which covers mental health treatment for the elderly. Later, she will take another three-day course, and that will give her credits for her Certificate in Geriatric Mental Health. In addition, because of the impending war, she and her husband feel obligated to do something for our war veterans. Thus, they have enlisted to be volunteers at the Veterans Hospital, affiliated

with the UW physicians. She will do something in Social Work, and her husband will provide medical care.

People are interesting to her, and she is so very interested in the cultures that people present. She and her husband both read and share the stories with each other. She always shares with me what book she is reading now, and recommends me which one I should put into my reading list. For her, aging successfully doesn't grab her as much as her own wishes—"the next time around, I will be greedy." "I will retain my present thoughts on life, but I will also be a linguist, a pianist, a mathematician, and a traveler in space." She advises all elderly, and the young elderly to make sure they continue to make friends with younger people. "Their lives will be enriched with new ideas, and the sharing of experiences can be great!"

Implications for social work

For her, being a social worker who works with the elderly should have a loving heart, caring and fair mind, patience, quick judgment, and know how to maximize limited resource, and always challenge ourselves. Furthermore, she emphasized that having professional counseling skills is a basic tool for being a good social worker. By working with the elderly, knowing all the drugs and medical terms is very helpful in providing a good service for the clients.

Newman

Newman immigrated to the US in 1994 under the Humanitarian Operation as a political refugee from Vietnam. He has five children in Vietnam, and six in the U.S. Since 1975, he had served as a major in Army of Red Republic of Vietnam for government for twenty-five years. After the war, he was forced to spend eleven years in reeducation camps, which placed him in several different areas in Vietnam. In

1994, he came to the U.S., under the assistance of Employment Opportunity Center and Refugee Federal Service Center, he got a job and worked at a multicultural social service agency while going to school at same time. He got his Associate of Arts degree from Seattle Central College, where he spent five years bathed in Spanish, German, and Japanese language. He has dreamed to be a polyglot, and now he is already on his way toward it, for he can amazingly speak six languages, including French, Spanish, Japanese, German, Vietnamese, and English. Since 1995, he has been taking classes at UW. He started with ESL classes, and majored in French literature later on. English literature came as his second major. He is now enjoying adult ballet class, where he feels pleasure and rejuvenates him. When he was in the army back in Vietnam in 1965, he had bachelor degree in law. In 2002, he began to go to law school at UW in order to get an equivalent degree, and an honorific certificate of law. Newman shared one story with me, which made him embarrassed. He mentioned that he had even registered for a social work class at UW three years ago, but quit afterwards. The reason was that he shy for being in a class with all ladies who are the same generation as his grand children, which made him feel inferiority with his old age. "No old man in social work."

Due to his busy life in both work and study, he does need a quiet place, and that is why he lives in senior housing by himself, where he can enjoy his life freely, doing something everyday, such as study, work, cook, read newspapers, and listen to music etc. His children come to visit him very often.

Though he is already seventy-eight years old, he keeps himself in very good health. He sometimes got back pain when sitting too long for studying; he got headaches when studying too much. Once in a while he needs to take sleeping pills to go to sleep. Generally speaking, his health condition is very good. He has taken no sick leave for school for three years, and has not missed any single class for five years

in Seattle Central College.

When I asked about how he felt about successful aging, he repeated several times that he was very thankful to the U.S., which provided him opportunities for restart his life. “It is a country of freedom.” “I came here to reestablish my life, and make fortune from my job.” Money is not everything for him. He shared with me that life is a school, people are students. He has always been the model for his off-springs.

He consoled himself. He helps people, being a volunteer for the Vietnamese community during his free time. “To live fully!” “Absorb knowledge!” “No crime, no gangster.” He emphasized that leading life soberly, moderately, and maintain mental and physical health is the core lessons in our life. “Idleness is the root of all evil.”

These are the valuable words he wants to share with students: “Life is a school; people living in the society are students. We can learn something new every day from other people, even from our children. The child is the father of man.” “Rolling stone gathers no moss.”

The quote he has on the wall of his cubicle shows the belief he carries through all his life.

“Attitude:

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life.

Attitude, to me, is more important than facts.

The remarkable thing is we have a choice everyday regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day.

We cannot change our past/the fact that people will act in a certain way/the inevitable.

The only thing we can do is play on the one thing we have, and that is our attitude.

I'm convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it.

And so it is with you

We are in charge of our attitudes.”

Implications for social work

The reason I decided to interview Newman is because during my practicum, I noticed he has done his work in an extremely perfect way. Besides, his schedule is all filled with work and class: twenty hours a week for the agency, fifteen hours work and study at law school in UW, and two hours researching in the library every morning before going to work or class. He always mentioned that it's his privilege to work with young people, which I think is our privilege to have him in our agency. He shared a Chinese saying with me which translated to mean that as long as there were three people together, there would be a teacher among them. He mentioned that we could learn something new everyday. As we get older, we continue to develop. We know ourselves better, we accept our limitations, we understand what matters in life. “Love life, love beauty.”

Discussion

According to the research, the sense of control and freedom of an individual is very important to both psychological and physical health. Perceived locus of control and competence are two important aspects of a sense of independence (Searle, Mahon, Iso-Ahola, Sdrolas & Dyck, 1995). To be able to control over one's life has often been described as the pillar of human functioning and living. The core of one's psychological function is the belief that he or she is able to undertake various activities and tasks and is capable of performing them successfully. By knowing Laura and

Newman's life, we can see that they live their life very independently. There is no transportation problem for them to go everywhere. There is no serious health problem for them which will impede their learning and daily life. Both of their mental status is positive and stable in absorbing something new everyday. Furthermore, they both have a strong will to go for their goals once they have set.

The importance of personal control and freedom suggests that people want to be able to live their lives independently. While the degree of personal control and freedom may vary, the desire to be self-determined to the end of human life is evident (Langer & Rodin, 1976; Rodin & Langer, 1977; Schulz, 1976; Schulz & Hanusa, 1978). It is not surprising that a greater sense of control over life will positively lower the rate of illness and have better health. However, the biggest constraint to independent living and psychological well-being is the belief that one cannot undertake tasks and complete them successfully. In other words, a lack of control of oneself critically undermines one's desire to live life independently. If independent living is psychologically the essence of human functioning, because it promotes physical and psychological health, it then becomes important for society to create the environment and programs that are likely to enhance a sense of control and competence in its citizens, especially among those whose sense of independent living has decreased due to various factors and circumstances.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, cited as Mark S. Searle; Michael J. Mahon; Seppo E. Iso-Ahola; Heather Adam Sdrolias; Joanne van Dyck, 1995) proposes that personal competency is an important motivator in human behavior. Bandura postulated a theory of self-efficacy which mentioned that a primary motivator for a person is the perception of competence or personal mastery. The elderly represent a part of the population whose control may be imperiled due to the changes in their social environment and physiology. Therefore, the education intervention rooted in

the social learning theory may enhance the sense of independence and well being to the elderly.

Successful aging

For decades, people are talking about successful aging. But what is “successful aging?” Both Laura and Newman ask me what is the definition for successful aging. The idea of successful aging is actually culturally-determined by regarding the interrelationship between family involvement. American elders take successful aging as self-sufficiency, the ability to live alone, and the ability to take good care of oneself while Chinese elders would not be able to understand why one would want to be self-sufficient in old age. Instead, they view their families’ willingness to meet their financial, psychological and physical needs as a sign that one is aging successfully. Furthermore, Chinese elders’ ideas regarding a good old age allude to how others view them, while American elder’s thought of successful aging in terms of how they viewed the world.

Being optimistic

Optimists are individuals who have the tendency to believe that they will generally experience good outcomes in life (Scheier & Carver, 1985, as cited in Karina Davidson; Kenneth Prkachin, 1997). The stable inclination has been viewed as a positive influence of health-enhancement or health-promotion behavior. According to this framework, when optimists believe a goal to be attainable, they will continue to strive toward it, even the progress is difficult or slow. In other words, people who lack of this characteristic are expected to frequently disengage from goal attainment efforts. Besides, optimists are expected to experience positive affect and psychological well-being stemming from the expectation of goal achievement and

from the rewards of problem-solving activity. Conversely, negative affects are expected to characterize those low in optimism. Laura and Newman, in their own way, both take everything in a positive way, which support their strong will to overcome everything.

Conclusion

It is hardly surprising that the same things that make for a fulfilling life before the age of 50 apply beyond it as well: connecting with other people, feeling useful, having fun. But those things seem to become more elusive when getting older. For many Americans, growing old means a bleak prospect in a society that values youth and minimizes the contributions of the elderly. But, it does not have to be that way. Aging contentedly is a matter of perspective. The simplest way of summing it up is to switch the concept from “As we get older, we decay” to “As we get older, we continue to develop,” says George Vaillant, a psychiatrist at Harvard’s Brigham and Women’s Hospital. “Oak trees and great Bordeaux keep getting better until they die.”

People need to recognize that they are aging and that they will someday probably face health problem and diminished capabilities, if they haven’t already. The difficulty is that people do not have preparation for the sky will fall on us one day. The people who age well are the people who are honest about the problems they are not able to solve. It makes it much easier to cope with when it comes.

Many people get more comfortable with themselves as they age. As people get older, they find more acceptance of themselves. Some people welcome letting go of the superficial things, such as financial concern, beauty, and fame. We can make aging something that we are looking forward to. Keep on learning and pay attention to what you already possess, learn to be more hopeful and resilient. Confront

problems, and define and solve the problems is sometimes easier with the help of your family, friends, or professionals. Be active, because through action, people find out what they care about and what they like to do. The health benefits are numerous, and include not only a positive effect on mood but a preservation of mental function. The most satisfying achievements-whether professional, personal, creative or spiritual-may be the ones you attain with a full appreciation of human limits (Miller, 2001).

Reference

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