

## Op-Ed Gerontology

Many of our seniors are living in isolation though we live and grow in community. Living and growing does not end when a person retires or when a person is confined to their home due to severe and painful arthritis. Each person is capable of living a meaningful life. I have learned this over the last three years while volunteering in a group home for adults with mental illness and seniors who would otherwise be homeless. My ability to love and be compassionate has grown exponentially. It has been amazing work with people that live with many struggles. Older adults lose their independence as they lose their ability to drive or navigate the metro. Older adults lose their sense of self as they stop working the job they have been in for 40 years. Older adults can no longer choose what they eat both as their physician determines they are at risk for diabetes and have to make diet changes and as they lose their ability to cook their own food or make a cup of tea because they are afraid they will forget to turn off the stove. Older adults also lose their significant others and friends to death. Older adults do gain chronic illnesses like hypertension and osteoporosis, which affect the number of doctor visits, medications, diet, and mobility. Life style changes are hard for anyone, but especially for older adults who require support and care to manage and thrive in these changes.

According to the 2014 National Population Projections (U.S. Census Bureau), 47.8 million people (14.88% of the population) in the United States are over 65 years of age. In 10 years this number is expected to grown to 65.9 million, that is nearly 19% of the total population! This growing population will also have high level of need as their number of chronic illnesses increased, as their ability to perform their IDALS and ADLs decreases, as United States systems change, and as their cognitive ability to adapt to and understand these changes decreases. This does not include need older adults have in regard to their mental health. In 2014 serious thoughts of suicide was reported in 2.9 million adults aged 50 or older.

What can you do?

Notice the 87 year old homeless man sitting on a park bench in DuPont Circle playing checkers. Look him in the eyes and ask him where he learned to play. Tell him about your experiences trying to learn, or better yet challenge him to a game. Play your best and expect to lose.

What can you do?

Stop by your neighborhood senior center or retirement home. I've been going to my local one once a week for three years. It does not matter what you say or how long you spend. It doesn't matter if you go every day or visit one single afternoon. The only thing these men and women, my 40 grandfathers and 10 grandmothers, care about is that I look them in the eyes and say good morning. Do you play the guitar or keyboard? Learn Brown Eyed Girl and Down to the River to Pray. You will see people who do not remember their name sing along.

Are you a social worker, nurse or lawyer thinking how will this affect my work? With estimations of seniors reaching 65.9 million by 2025, you will encounter older adults. As the number of people requiring services grows, both macro and micro level works will be needed to fulfill the need. If you're looking for a growing field that will allow you to explore new interventions and new programs, gerontology is it. You will never have a boring day at work.

Spending time with older adults has taught me how to slow down, be intentional, and love. So get out there and meet some of our older adults! It will change your life and theirs!

Where I got my numbers:

<http://www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2014/summarytables.html> Tables 6 and 9

<http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-FRR2-2014/NSDUH-FRR2-2014.pdf>