

Challenges of Changing Life Stages

By Marjorie Howe, LCSW

One of the challenges of aging well is to adapt to the psychological changes that each phase of life presents. Adapting well will contribute to thriving in our later years rather than fearing a diminishing quality of life. People who have trouble adapting often present themselves to counselors for help.

By far, the most common complaints that mental health workers encounter are depression and anxiety. Across all age groups, these symptoms decrease quality of life more than any other. In the aging population, depression and anxiety can present slightly differently than in other ages, often manifest by physical and pain complaints as well as thinking problems. Depression is experienced as a failure to thrive: feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, sleeping and appetite problems, confusion and focusing difficulties, and exaggerated symptoms of pain and physical distress. Depression in older adults will often complicate diagnosing physical problems and after physical symptoms are treated, can exaggerate the original problem.

If you ask a group of older adults what distress they encounter most frequently in their life, they often respond with “loss.” Loss of mental acuity, loss of physical dexterity, loss of their peer group, and loss of numerous expectations that they took for granted at earlier times in their lives. Some adults have difficulty navigating the transition into retirement, others have anger over the loss of physical robustness, and others are very aware of the loss of mental flexibility, short-term memory, and other cognitive changes. Depression and grief are



distinctly different; one is abnormal and one is a normal response to loss. Depression and grief can co-exist; both benefit from counseling.

Anxiety in older adults also exaggerates medical conditions: anxiety is experienced as a heightened sense of dread, worrying or ruminating thoughts, a loss of control which may or may not reflect reality, and irrational fear to stress. Aging adults often encounter situations that are outside their experience, creating rational fears that are beyond their coping resources. Across all populations, chronic anxiety and depression create susceptibility to substance abuse (alcohol and prescription drugs), sensitize a person’s response to physical pain and distress, and

increase self-soothing behaviors often in the form of overeating and social withdrawal.

Often family members will come to the counselor’s office to discuss the problems they have with an older adult who is not adapting well to aging. While learning how to cope with an aging relative or friend is always helpful, a counselor can only provide limited help in this situation unless the older adult presents for help. Treating depression, anxiety and other difficulties will help improve the quality of life for everyone interacting with the individual.

Facing challenges at any stage in life requires courage, flexibility and perseverance. When situations become overwhelming, however, it’s time to reach out for help. Counseling can truly help alter your quality of life. Often it cannot change the situation but it can provide resources and skills that make the situation better, the definition of adaptability. There really is no reason to live with fear and sadness; these experiences are changed every day for many people by trained and compassionate mental health professionals. **h&h**

Marjorie Howe, LCSW, has spent years in private practice, and as a managing partner in The Family Stress Center and Aging Family Services in Raleigh, NC. She has been a long-standing member of the NC Society for Clinical Social Work, serving on their Board for many years in numerous capacities and also serving on the Board for the Clinical Social Work Federation. She currently treats clients aged 16 and over—including those with anxiety disorders, eating disorders, trauma, and mood disorders—individually, in couples, and in groups. For more information or to schedule an initial evaluation, contact: Carolina Partners Counseling Center of Cary, (919) 929-9610, 1330 SE Maynard Rd, Suite 103, Cary, NC.