Understanding and facilitating transitions: Older adults and their family members

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Definitions

- **Noun**: “the process or period of changing from one state or condition to another.” (Oxford Online Dictionary)
- **Verb**: “to undergo or cause to undergo a process or period of transition.” (Oxford Online Dictionary)
- Complexities of the process are not captured in the definition!
Types of transitions experienced by older adults

- Retirement
- Chronic illness/physical and mental impairments
- Death of spouse or significant others
- Relocations (due to illness, death of spouse, natural disasters, war)
- Dying and death
Ways in which to conceptualize transitions

- Bridges’ work
- Meleis and colleagues
- Life course perspective
What makes transitions so hard for older adults?

- Magnitude of life transitions (e.g. work to retirement, chronic illness leading to disability)
- Domino effect – one transition may lead to many
- Some transitions occur concurrently, even without domino effect
• Impact of transitions on family members (including triggering old issues within families)
• Existential issues (issues of meaning and purpose in life)
• Some of the coping methods used in previous transitions may not be accessible anymore (e.g. strenuous exercise)
• May have less physical and mental resources to cope
• Depending upon the geographical location in the world, resources for older adults may be scarce
Psychological/spiritual sequelae experienced by older adults and family members

- Depression
- Grief
- Powerlessness/helplessness
- Fear
- Anger
- Despair
- Sometimes – growth and renewed sense of meaning
Responses to Transitions

- Isolation/withdrawal
- Apathy
- Sometimes addictions
- At times, suicide
- Sometimes, movement towards growth
How can health and human service professionals respond?

- Understand significance of transitions for older adults and family members
- Verbally acknowledge the difficulties of transitional periods
- Verbally acknowledge the emotional reactions to transitions and help family members process reactions
- Help the older adult process emotions related to trauma causing relocation (e.g. disasters)
• Help older adults and family members process existential issues, or refer them to a skilled professional (such as a chaplain or spiritual leader)

• If relocating to an adult child’s home, help family negotiate new rules/guidelines for living together

• Encourage activities (such as volunteer work) that address need for meaning and purpose in life
• Rethink first bed availability policy for placement from hospitals to nursing homes

• Advocate for programs within working situation that address the emotional needs of older adults and family members in transition (e.g. supportive services for older adults entering nursing homes)
• Assess coping methods – be alert for signs of dependence upon substances

• Help older adults find new coping methods if they are unable to use previous strategies (e.g. strenuous exercise)
How can professionals respond? (Institutional level)

- Help older adults and family navigate through health care system (e.g. assessments for home care; options for care outside of home, such as assisted living, nursing homes and hospices)
- Offer information to older adults and family members about technology that allows older adults to age in place
Policies/procedures

- More age friendly cities
- More intergenerational communities or programs
- Programs that allow older adults to share their home with others (e.g. a college student)
- More housing options for older adults, such as low-income housing
• Continued movement towards person centred care within nursing homes
• More single occupancy rooms in nursing homes
Policies that address issues of access/care for marginalized sub-populations of older adults: those with HIV/AIDS, intellectually disabilities, the homeless and those who are in prison.
Concluding Thoughts

- Not in his goals, but in his transitions is man great. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

For more information, see: