

Using the Generation Gap to Ease Changes in Life Style

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This paper examines the relationship which developed between first-year nursing students and some elderly individuals in a nursing home. It is not intended to be a detailed research report, but a discussion of some observations made which would be interesting to investigate further, later.

The first-year nursing students who visited the elderly in nursing homes obviously found it an enjoyable experience. This may have been due to satisfactory completion of a first-time "clinical" contact. However, in talking with the elderly and with the students, it became apparent that it was more than that. In fact, they had a number of experiences in common — this being contrary to the commonly-held view that the young have little to share with the old.

Over a number of years, the realization of such a similarity prompted the author to distribute a questionnaire to study the feelings of both groups when faced with a major change in life-style. A convenience sample of twelve individuals in each group was selected. The elderly satisfied these criteria:

- They had been admitted to the nursing home during the previous year.
- They were admitted from their own homes, where they had been living independently.
- In the nursing home, they were living in double rooms and required only minimal care.

The students had recently entered university and were living in double rooms in a women's residence, having left their parents' homes. These were the criteria for students' inclusion in the study.

The objective of the study was to find out what feelings were shared about leaving well-established ways of life and long-term family ties and friendships, and what anxieties or pleasurable anticipation was common to both groups. The questionnaire was given to the elderly by interviews in the clients' rooms and it was given to the students in a private room.

The ten questions dealt with:

1. Feelings prior to the change in life-style.
2. Feelings after the change occurred.

3. Concerns about leaving old associates.
4. Establishing new associates.
5. Feelings about sharing a room with a stranger.
6. Keeping or disposing of personal belongings.
7. Maintenance of privacy.
8. Maintenance of independence.
9. Maintenance of individuality.
10. Financial status.

Some experiences were shared by many of the respondents and sometimes a dichotomy of feelings about them appeared. On reflection, the feelings engendered ranged along continua of happiness-sadness and gain-loss, with some shifting back and forth.

The students expressed a mixture of sadness and enthusiasm about the major move they had planned to make as they thought back to their last weeks at home. Some had realized much more clearly than others that their move was an irreversible step and that "nothing would ever be quite the same again". They said it was inevitable that old friendships would wane, but families would still be there. As one student wrote, "It was my first major time of being away from family and hometown, an area that is so familiar and full of memories." The move was eased by the students' need to get away from home: "I was leaving to do something I wanted to do. It was a new life I was going to and it was exciting."

The elderly expressed only sad feelings about their recent moves. They, too, had given up ways of life which had lasted many years, and in which some had been close to their families. There were, as well, long-time associations which had to be left behind. But for the elderly, the move did not have the promise of "more to come" after it was made. It would be the final move of lifetime, one fraught with sadness, rebellion and a dreadful inevitability. They knew the next change would be death, but feared death less than they feared the loss of independence.

Because the elderly were experiencing this loss, they were acutely aware of the importance to the students of their gain in independence. The elderly could appreciate fully the joy of new-found freedom, albeit with ambivalence about leaving home. Through their visits with the young people, they could assuage vicariously their own feelings of sadness and loss. The elderly could, by virtue of their own lifelong experiences, perceive and share in the students' joy.

The actual move into residence evoked various responses from the students ranging from enthusiasm to depression; two felt deserted

by their families. The reaction to sharing a room was positive for nearly all, as this was found to be a good way to get to know other people. Many had shared a room at home, and all but one student were more eager than apprehensive; one was finding the experience a severe strain on her coping ability.

The older group viewed sharing a room with less apparent concern and with some resignation. Their other concerns about the move were greater at this time. Once nursing home residence had become established, room arrangements tended to increase in importance.

The choice of personal belongings to fit into "half a room" was viewed with some anxiety plus a considerable amount of humour by the young. Trying to decide on "their favourite things" had been a difficulty. For the elderly, the problem had been solved fairly well some time before, often by giving valued possessions to family members. They enjoyed the student discussions on the topic and all were in sympathy with each other over choices that had had to be made.

The elderly were supportive of the students who said that their rooms now belonged to a brother or sister. They perceived just how real a loss it was, a poignant reminder that change had come to stay.

Problems of financial arrangements were of considerable magnitude to the elderly. In most cases they gave their pensions to the nursing home, receiving a small amount back. This, they felt, was a very real threat to the maintenance of their independence and management of their own affairs. The students, however, felt pleasure and pride in being more free to manage their own finances. These greatly opposed experiences drew the groups closer, each being very aware of the other's gains and losses.

Early in their university experience the students were more concerned with maintaining their individuality and developing new relationships. The students felt strongly it should be "easier to be one-self" at university, since there was a greater diversity of people, and people with whom the newcomers had no previous shared experiences. However, the students expressed some anxiety — concerns over "new people and new ways" and the ability to establish new behaviours and interactions.

On entering the nursing home, the loss of individuality was of less concern to the elderly than the loss of privacy and decision-making ability. Most of them had a good sense of self which they did not feel was seriously threatened at that time. In contrast to the students, their earlier associations made while at home were of importance in maintaining their self-concepts. After a longer time in the nursing home they did begin to suffer from increased concern over maintaining their sense of individuality and worth.

These two groups at different ends of the age continuum revealed a similarity of feelings and experience in some areas which led to mutual enjoyment of each other's company. As has so often happened in similar situations, each group expressed delight in having gained as it were, a grand-parent or a granddaughter. In life, joy and sadness are often interwoven, and for the elderly and the young these could be shared, sometimes easing the sorrow. We are aware that a "burden shared is often eased", and perhaps we should take more constructive steps to promote the sharing of tension which is felt by old and young at such crucial times in their lives. Into such 'clinical' interactions as these can go a needed expression of loving and caring.

Comment se servir du fossé entre générations pour faciliter les changements dans le style de vie

L'auteur a observé les relations s'établissant entre des étudiantes de première année en sciences infirmières ayant quitté leur famille pour étudier à l'université et des clients d'un certain âge partis de chez eux pour vivre en foyer. L'auteur discute informellement des similitudes et différences identifiées au sujet des inquiétudes et des sentiments de ces deux groupes. Le déplacement considéré comme une expérience commune permet aux jeunes et aux plus vieux de prendre conscience de leurs sentiments au sujet des diverses implications se situent notamment au niveau des changements dans leur façon de vivre, de leurs anciennes et nouvelles amitiés, de la sauvegarde de leur identité et de leur individualité ainsi que de leurs biens et de leur situation financière.