

Program 03
Seizing the Day

Mastering change and transition in later life

The focus of today's program is on that very important life transition which we know as retirement – a word that evokes many and varied emotions and reactions – for some of us, it is a time when we have to face leaving a successful and satisfying career and all that goes with that; for others it might be because of an unforeseen redundancy; or for others again, it could be a long-anticipated and exciting time in our life when we are free from work constraints and can do just what we want.

From the University of New South Wales in Sydney, psychologist Dr Joanne Earl is passionate about making retirement a positive experience for all Australians. Her most recent research demonstrates the value of goal setting in retirement planning and the importance of exercising personal control in the transition to retirement. Dr Tim Windsor from Flinders University in Adelaide is a member of a national team looking at two important transitions in later life – retirement from the workforce and residential relocation.

Interviewees

Dr Joanne Earl

Dr Tim Windsor

Discussion Starter

Change is a fact of life: inevitable, constant and unstoppable. We either accept it and respond to it with initiative, or see it as an enemy, try and avoid it, and thus become a victim of it. When we avoid change, we are merely postponing the inevitable. Even if we lock ourselves away to try and avoid it, it inevitably finds us and confronts us, because avoidance itself changes us profoundly – and not for the better.

Change demands transition. The nature of that transition and how we experience it is not so much a matter of luck but choice, our choice. We don't have to be victims of change if we choose to take the initiative and manage our circumstances, set new goals, and employ some optimism in identifying what we can do rather than what is now passed or what can't be done.

For men, change – and the challenge of transition in later life, can be major, with seismic shifts in employment status, challenges of health and physical capacity, bereavement, and new demands of grown up children facing their own issues. And though we might assume that entering later life we have a consolidated satisfactory and acceptable sense of ourselves, even this can be radically shaken, requiring us to undergo fundamental change.

Early in life though we seem to have an abundance of hopeful energy, goals and dreams, later life can see us slowly slipping into malaise of mediocrity, resignation, and 'mental retirement'. It has been said that a life worth living is one of our own choosing. This is especially important in later life, where having a passion for goals, for the pursuit of meaning, and saying 'yes' to life still means growing and expanding, and always moving into the new. Age is no barrier to this, and in fact makes it all the more important if we are to avoid a premature and unnecessary decline.

Of course, what is new and unfamiliar is often uncomfortable, until it gives way to satisfaction of accomplishment and meaning. As in other stage of life, if we take courage and push beyond our comfort zone into the unnervingly new, the boundaries of our comfort zone will expand to match the new scope of our experience.

Granted, we're not all suited to 'riding the rapids', but men are by nature action oriented and made for meaning, challenge and adventure – for a many-layered life, with one achievement revealing the path to another and each completion being a new point of revitalizing departure. We are at our best when we are creating something, making things happen, making some sort of difference – exercising the dignity of causality. Only our thinking not our age stands in the way of this.

Questions

- 1. How can men in later life best keep themselves in the physical and mental condition required to stay vitally engaged with life in creative ways?*
- 2. What are some of the pressures that influence older men to simply acquiesce to the idea of disengaged ageing, instead of continuing to live their lives to the full?*
- 3. What are some of the most motivating influences that can sustain men in active, productive, and creative lives?*

Related Resources

Dr Joanne Earl, Senior Lecturer at University of New South Wales, discusses the results of her retirement planning research at the Productive Ageing Centre Forum on 25 June 2013. YouTube

Project Consultant

Dr John Ashfield