

Program 05

No Place To Call Home

How men in retirement can become refugees in their own lives

Beginning with a comment on the unsatisfactory nature of that word – retirement – we then move to look at some of the realities of retirement – “What I’ve always wanted to do”, soon becomes “golf every day is boring!” Adjusting to the routine without the structure that “going to work” has provided for many years, and fitting in to the long-established routines within the home are both challenges to be faced by older men. After another look at some of the stereotypes about ageing, the program then looks at the centrality of projects for older men, the importance of overlapping circles of interest between the older male and his partner, and maintaining good relationships within the home.

Interviewees

Dr John Ashfield

Dr Anthony Brown

Dr Don Edgar

Discussion Starter

Being an older male and moving into retirement sounds simple enough, but for many men it opens a Pandora’s box of unexpected changes and difficulties. Men’s lives are mostly lived in the extra-familial domain – outside the home and many of its activities. Men are predominantly the breadwinners engaged in the workplace, with women (at least for a good part of their lives) being more concerned with the familial domain – homemaking, raising children, and looking out for family relationships.

And whether post-modern political correctness likes it or not, this division of labour still roughly remains the preference of the majority of men and women. It is stating the obvious to suggest that the modus operandi of these domains is quite different, and yet, for men stepping out of the workplace into retirement, it can be a rude awakening! Little wonder that for many men retirement isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.

For men, their role in the workforce (work and occupation) largely defines who they are, their place in the world and their value to themselves and others. We tend to think much of a hard working provider, and much less of a man that is unemployed. Work is also where the majority of men feel included in the world of men, and derive most benefit from social interaction.

When older men retire they may not only lose their sense of place in the world, but also their sense of who they are. And of course, retirement may attract subtle yet derogatory imputations of ‘funded idleness’, being too old to be productive, and now less than competent. Men in retirement all too easily succumb to internalising the negative messages of our youth focussed culture.

Just as retirement may mean men losing their place in the world of work and men, they may also find that once spending much more time at home, that they have no real place there either. After all, it hasn’t been their domain, but that of their partner or wife; though they may be welcome, wearing out that welcome does not infrequently result in marital strain and even divorce. Women and men not often used to being in each other’s company can be quite abrasive – something that many men have misjudged on embarking on ‘grey nomad’ adventures. Even if he chose the adventure, the caravan or Winnebago becomes her home, in which he will likely not have equal status. Older men in retirement can quickly find themselves without ‘place’ and sojourners, or worse, refugees in their own lives.

As a culture we have much work to do in revising our attitudes and behaviours in relation to age and age related value, work and occupation, and the meaning of retirement – which appears fraught with dilemmas. Men too would do well to give much more thought to how they can transition from full-time paid work to forms of work that can accommodate their physical capacity, and help maintain their place in the world and their personal sense of value. It may also be that we have to think long

and hard about how we can create new all male environments where men can find friendship, interact with other men, and have a place where they can be more fully themselves.

Questions

- 1. How can we take the 'voluntary' out of voluntary work, so that work that is not monetarily remunerated is still respected?*
- 2. Many men and women in retirement do adapt effectively to spending much more time together. What might be some ways in which men and women can achieve a workable arrangement in their retirement?*
- 3. In recent decades there has been a concerted cultural effort to discourage or render unlawful all-male groups as discriminatory. Given that women benefit much from having access to same sex social groups, would the advantages of men having the same, now outweigh any perceived disadvantage to women?*

Project Consultant

Dr John Ashfield