

Program 10

At Home in the Shed

How some older men are finding a place where they can belong and thrive again, after retirement or displacement from the workforce.

In Programs 09 and 10, we are taking a close look at men's learning in later life. In the first program, we heard from Sue Ross, Community Development Officer at Eastwood Community Centre in suburban Adelaide, about their initiatives for older men, including men with acquired brain injuries. We also heard from Professor Barry Golding from Federation University in Ballarat Victoria and National President of Adult Learning Australia – Professor Barry Golding is also Patron of the Australian Men's Shed Association. In Program 10, we visit Pooraka Farm Community Centre in Adelaide's northern suburbs, and speak to Community Development Officer Heather Hewitt, and then to Shed Coordinator Bryce Routley about the support for older men through the Pooraka Men's Shed, and the role of the Australian Men's Shed Association.

Interviewees

Heather Hewitt

Bryce Routley

Plus several men from the Pooraka Men's Shed, Adelaide South Australia

Discussion Starter

Millennia ago the author of Ecclesiastes – believed to be King Solomon, said that, “a faithful friend is the medicine of life”. Turns out he was spot on. Modern research has confirmed that social support has a powerful protective effect on health – it can potentially add years to your life. Men who lack social support and are socially isolated, are at greater risk of developing coronary heart disease, and have from two to five times the risk of dying from all causes, compared to men who have strong social ties.

What is seldom understood about social support is that, just as men and women are brought up and conditioned in significantly different male/female cultural domains, so too what constitutes meaningful and helpful social support for each may also be different – and often is. For example, women tend to find support through verbal and emotional expressiveness with other women. But for men, social support is experienced more through activities like working or playing alongside other men. Even when men comfort each other in a crisis, it is physical presence that matters most to them, not intimate talk. Male communication is often different as well; though generally much more sparing, it is no less meaningful or self-disclosing than female communication. It simply uses different devices, like yarns, humour, metaphors, and even insults.

Men can benefit greatly from the support that only other men can provide. Who else but other men know the experience of, or understand, the particular issues of masculinity and manhood? Which is why all-male company and activities available in men's sheds, can often provide a safe male 'ritual space', permitting men, in their own unique ways, to display vulnerability, engage in self-disclosure, work through personal issues, develop emotional ties, and accept support from those who understand them most.

It is in men's sheds that many older men experience the important qualities of mateship, which actually implies more than merely a male version of friendship. Mateship is a multi-faceted social code, and one that demands mutual respect, egalitarianism, a 'fair go', trust and selflessness, interdependence, and sharing.

Life after retirement can be tough for many older men, and can be even worse for those displaced from the workforce, or struggling with disability. Not only do they stand to lose their sense of self-identity and usefulness, but they can also fall prey to health diminishing isolation, meaninglessness, and poor mental health.

The unique phenomenon of the men's shed movement in Australia is an excellent example of what can be accomplished by communities and individuals who take the trouble to talk

to men about their experience, and enquire of them (rather than assuming) what they need and will find most helpful.

Men's sheds provide a unique environment in which older men can find vitally important male companionship, a sense of belonging and purpose, and the kind of unassuming support most helpful to them continuing to thrive rather than becoming victims of retirement or displacement from the workforce.

Questions

- 1. For men, supportive all-male environments are few and far between; why is this the case?*
- 2. When we consider the benefits men gain emotionally and psychologically from being in their own shared company in environments like men's sheds, how is this at odds with the common stereotype of the emotionally constricted male?*
- 3. Men's sheds have shown that in supportive all-male environments there may be much potential for male physical and mental health promotion. Why don't governments put money into these kinds of initiatives given that men's health has fallen so far behind women's health?*

Related Resources

Men Learning Through Life. Edited by Barry Golding, Rob Mark and Annette Foley, NIACE 2014

Men's Sheds – A Strategy to Improve Men's Health. Gary Misan et al. University of South Australia 2008

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