Sustaining Expression of Identity in Older Adults

Youth is the gift of nature, but age is a work of art.

~ Stanislaw Jerzy Lec, n.d.

Identity is the distinctive set of personal characteristics by which individuals are recognized and known and which distinguishes one individual from others. Identity determines how we think about ourselves and how others think about us, and influences our place in society. It is the base from which we are drawn to certain people and from which others notice or do not notice us. It is also the base from which conversations start and friendships form. In this way, our identity is essential to our connection with the larger society.

However, the aging process imposes challenges to individuals’ identities that affect their connections with society. For example, retirement traditionally marks a separation from an individual’s life work and is often associated with a reduction in both income and circle of acquaintances, which could negatively affect identity. Similarly, the aging body changes over time and may become less capable of executing activities that were once accomplished with ease. Compromised vision makes it more difficult to read, write letters, and use the telephone, and eventually may make it necessary to relinquish one’s driver’s license, which in itself is a serious blow to one’s identity. Hearing loss often makes it increasingly difficult to talk with others; a stroke or dementia may diminish one’s ability to speak or remember; stroke or hip fracture may slow a once quick and sure gait; vertebral fractures may shorten stature (which is also an important aspect of identity) and will make some individuals stooped to the point that they are unable to see the eyes of others and vice versa.

Eventually, incontinence may also intrude, making it awkward for some individuals to engage in their usual social activities. Older adults’ family members and friends will often be experiencing these same challenges, and in time, individuals are likely to lose their connections with those who knew their younger identity; this often occurs at a time when it has become more difficult for older adults to meet and connect to establish new friendships. Some older adults may become unable to convey their identity to others without assistance or to deliver accounts of their lifelong accomplishments and feelings to their now-limited circle of acquaintances.

Therefore, it is important that gerontological nurses, as caregivers...
of older adults, make every effort to facilitate and sustain a sense of identity in the individuals we come into contact with. Nurses must also create innovative ways for them to continue to express who they are, even in the face of significant losses and diminished identity. Fortunately, there are wonderful role models that can guide our efforts.

I recently watched a 5K foot race, and a dozen or more of the 500 runners appeared to be in their 70s or 80s. The last person to cross the finish line looked to be in his mid 80s, and although he finished last (with a volunteer discreetly riding a bicycle some distance behind him), he drew by far the most enthusiastic cheers from the crowd. And a woman around his age who watched the race from her porch smiled and seemed glad that her cohort was represented in the race.

My 90-year-old friend Janis Bible still plays her piano like she always did, and her friends in the assisted living facility come from their rooms on walkers and in wheelchairs to hear her play—and to sing along. Even with serious health problems, Dorothy Hodges continued to bake her special desserts for her family and friends on Wednesday nights; Lillian mended her friend’s tattered quilt while recovering from a stroke; and country farmers Chart and Kruger grew green beans, tomatoes, and cucumbers and gave them away to people who did not have a garden. Cassie, age 90, brought her sewing machine with her when she moved to the nursing home and mended her own and other residents’ clothes.

Identity is the fiber that self-appreciation and appreciation by others is made of, and it is essential to the well-being of young and old alike. As a society, we must help each older adult continue to experience and express the passions that, over a lifetime, have become who they are. We must create ways for even those who are seriously disadvantaged by health problems or social decline to retain their passions as well. For example, with community planning, older adults who no longer walk can plant and tend raised garden plots, providing fresh vegetables for their living community. Likewise, arts and literary societies can become a regular and welcome presence in senior centers and assisted living facilities.

Many older adults are good writers, guardians of an endangered art form in this increasingly computer-driven society; they should be encouraged to share their cumulative wisdom and insight through their literary writings that reach a broader audience. Many also have musical and other artistic talents that can be prominently featured, enriching the living environment of their communities.

It is through their identity that older adults continue to make their unique and precious contribution to society, and we must not fail to take note of it in even the frailest and quietest of individuals. We must give them voice and time on the center stage of life and help them connect with each other and with society in a way that fosters appreciation of the traits, talents, and memories that still define their being.

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