

# *Aging and Society*

## **Defining Generic Key Terms and Concepts**

- **Gerontology** – is the study of aging that includes analysis of information from many disciplines ranging from science to the humanities (the biological, psychological and social aspects of aging).
  
- **Geriatrics** - is the medical study of aging
  
- **Cohorts and Generations** – **COHORTS** are groups who have experienced the same significant life events within a specified time period. Colin Powell and Jane Fonda are in the same cohort. Cohorts differ in composition by such factors as racial makeup, gender, ethnic composition and size. They also differ in terms of their interaction with social institutions such as educational systems, the availability of pensions and trends in social services. For example, today’s seniors have many more options for receiving long-term care in their homes than seniors had in the past. Therefore, members of future cohorts who become frail in older age may have very different experiences than those of previous cohorts, who, if they became frail, moved to nursing homes. The process of cohort aging is the advancement of one cohort from one age category to another.

Sociologists reserve the term **GENERATIONS** to describe families, such as the generations of grandparents, children and grandchildren.

- **Life Stages** – **List and Define** - Life stages are another way of describing life’s transitions. Robert Atchley describes life stages as a combination of physical and social attributes such as adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, middle age, later maturity, and old age (Atchley & Barusch, 2004). In this module, we look specifically at middle age, later adulthood and old age.

**Middle Age:** Middle age is when physical changes become noticeable. It is also the age at which people are thought of as part of the “aging population” (but NOT the elderly population). Examples of changes during middle age:

- People seek physically less demanding activities
- Recovery from exercise takes longer
- Minor chronic illness becomes more prevalent
- Vision and hearing begin to decline

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Chronologically, middle age begins sometime near the 40's. During this stage a number of social changes may occur:

- Children leave home and become independent
- Married couples often grow closer
- People sometimes make middle life job changes
- Community involvement may increase
- Stay-at-home mothers enter the workforce
- Most women experience menopause
- Some middle aged people retire with no continuation of employment

Atchley and Barusch (2004) comment that this is a time marked by social transition - at home, on the job and in the family. Physical transitions come later.

For many, midlife is a time of reflection and “the beginning of an inner process of developing personal life meaning” (Atchley and Barusch, 2004, p.8). In addition, middle aged people often experience the deaths of those close to them, such as parents.

**Later Adulthood:** Later adulthood generally occurs sometime in the 60's. Declines in physical functioning and energy continue during this period and chronic illness becomes more common. Most people are active but the prevalence of activity limitations is more common. Middle-aged people experience more frequent deaths among family and friends. The changes that occur during this time are primarily social, as is the case with middle age.

Retirement usually occurs during this period. For most people this is welcome, although income is often reduced. During this period many are caring for aging parents. Atchley and Barusch (2004) sum up later adulthood with this positive note:

“Most people retain a fair amount of physical vigor in later adulthood that, coupled with freedom from responsibilities, makes this life stage one of the most open and free for those who are prepared to take advantage of it.”

**Old Age:** The onset of old age typically occurs in the late 70's to early 80's (although many people in their 80's and 90's show few signs of it). Old age is characterized by extreme physical frailty. In addition:

- Disabling chronic conditions are more common
- Mental processes slow down
- Chronic brain conditions become more common
- People feel that death is near
- Activity is decreased
- Social groups change due to deaths of family and friends (but, even in old age, most people have frequent contact with family and friends).
- Physical dependency and institutionalization are common

Old age is defined more by physical and mental changes rather than the social changes that accompany middle age and late adulthood. However, Atchley points out “that most people die before they reach extreme disability” (Atchley, 2000a, p.9).

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These stages are important for you to be aware of because many of your clients will travel through all three of them and your work with them will differ accordingly.

- **Ageism and the New Ageism—why is ageism dangerous and detrimental to the growth of our communities and to those who work with seniors?**

Ageism is prejudice or discrimination against older persons because of their age (Palmore, 1998). The following is Elizabeth Vierck's description of ageism (Vierck, 1988):

Ageism is manifested in our society's worship of youth and its anxiety over wrinkles, in the contradictions of our desire for longevity and reluctance to grow old, and in the media's use of phrases like "geritol jock" (an aging athlete) and "blue hair" concerts (those attended by older women). Ageism can occur at any age. When Eddie Mannix, an old-time executive at Warner Brothers, saw a screen test of 34 year old Fred Astaire, he said: "He's too old and too bald". (For those of you who are too young to remember Fred Astaire, he was a big star from the 1930's through 1981, when he made his last film. He received an honorary Academy Award in 1950, many Emmy Awards for television, a Kennedy Centre Honours award in 1978, the first year they were awarded, and numerous other honours.)

Many people fall victim to ageism by, in older age, becoming prejudiced against themselves. A rerun of the "Mary Tyler Moore Show" reminds us of this when a delightful, white haired older man explains to perky, youthful Mary that part of his daily routine is going to the park and sitting on a bench. He finds it rather boring, he says, but ever since he was little he has seen old men sitting on benches and feels it his obligation to the younger generation to do the same. The moral of the story is clear: Ageism can be a self fulfilling prophecy. A child learns to expect old men to take to benches and, faithfully, in older age, sits out the expectation.

- **Can you recall an incidence of ageism or an example of the term in action?**

The new ageism is a tendency to patronize seniors and be overly solicitous toward them (Quadagno, 2002) and is usually more subtle. For example, the medical professional who does not talk directly to a senior patient who is perfectly able to hear and cognitively in tact, but instead talks to a caregiver who accompanies her, is being patronizing. So too is a financial planner who does not listen to the desires of a senior client but assumes they know what the senior needs. Another major area of age discrimination is in the area of employment. Workers should be hired for jobs and maintain them because of competent job performance and not their age. Examples of this would be promoting a younger worker over an older, more capable worker to save money or conversely, firing an older worker who makes more money over a younger, less experienced worker simply to save money.

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- **What are some of the changes retirement brings to on one's life? Why should we be watching for these changes? How might we suggest ways to manage those changes that retirement brings?**

Seniors generally feel favourable to retirement regardless of age or gender and most expect to retire before age 65. Atchley and Barusch (2004) have identified various phases of retirement, including the changes your retiring clients go through as they adjust to this period of their lives.

#### 1) Pre-Retirement – Remote and Near.

In the remote phase, the individual see retirement as far off, but as an expected part of the work cycle. However, few people see retirement as something to plan for. During this phase, the most important activity (according to Atchley) is building a retirement income adequate for the style of life one wants to adopt in retirement. Developing leisure skills is another important prerequisite during the remote stage. It is easier to develop leisure skills and a network within the community during the earlier years.

The near phase of pre-retirement begins when retirement is looming. The public definition of this phase includes pre-retirement planning programs, retirement ceremonies, on the job training for a replacement, and possibly promotion into a less essential job. Two important things can happen during this period. First, older workers may get ready for separation from their jobs and prepare for the accompanying social situation. They may notice subtle differences in how people view them. They may see their jobs as more burdensome than they did previously. Second, they may fantasize about what their retirement will look like. The extent to which these fantasies are accurate or realistic will determine how smooth the transition will be.

#### 2) The Honeymoon Phase

This is a euphoric phase in which retirees do all the things they did not have time for before. This may be short or could last years, depending largely on financial resources. This is a critical phase. If the individual is able to settle into a routine that provides a satisfying life, then that routine will probably stabilize. (Atchley & Barusch, 2004, p.259)

#### 3) Immediate Retirement Routine

If the retirement routine provides a satisfying life, then that routine will stabilize. People who had full off-the-job lives are often able to establish such a routine easily.

#### 4) Rest and Relaxation

After retirement, many people go through a period of low activity, which differs greatly from the activity in the honeymoon period. Atchley calls this period the R&R phase. However, this low activity is usually temporary, returning to pre-retirement levels three years after retirement.

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#### 5) The Disenchantment Phase

Some people have a very hard time adjusting to retirement, and after the honeymoon phase, experience a real let down. People who are more likely to have difficulty:

Have few alternatives;

Have little money;

Have poor health;

Were over-involved in their jobs;

Is unaccustomed to running his or her own life;

Experience other role losses in addition to retirement

Leave communities where they lived for many years.

#### 6) The Reorientation Phase

During this phase, individuals who have experienced the letdown pull themselves together and develop new avenues of involvement.

#### 7) Retirement Routine

In this phase of retirement, the individual has a well-developed set of criteria for making choices, and they allow him to deal with life in a seasonably comfortable and orderly fashion. Life during this period is predictable and satisfying – the individual has mastered the retirement role.

#### 8) The Termination Phase

Many people die during the Retirement Routine phase. Others may develop illness or disability which transfers them into the ‘sick and disabled role’ (Atchley, 2000a, p.123). Increasing dependence usually occurs gradually, so loss of the retirement role also happens gradually. Some people terminate retirement, returning to work or losing finances to the point that the individual becomes dependent on someone else.

### Additional Thought-Provoking Questions

Gerontologists use various measures to describe people’s aging process in a social context. The measures include chronological age, social roles, functional age, subjective age, cohorts and generations and life stages

Erik Erikson described 3 later life psychosocial stages. These are Generativity vs. Stagnation, Integrity vs. Despair and gerotranscendence

Widowhood is a major role associated with later life. For many, this role is particularly difficult.

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#### Review Questions:

1. Which of the following is determined by “what people can do”?
  - A. Chronological age
  - B. Social roles and aging
  - C. Functional age
  - D. Subjective age
  
2. A birth cohort can best be defined as:
  - A. A collection of people born in the same area
  - B. A collection of people born with the same defects
  - C. An aggregate of people born within the same minority group
  - D. An aggregate of people born during the same period





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### Answer Guide to Review Questions:

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1. c
2. d