

AGING IN AMERICA

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

As an adult, we have a fairly easy way to understand the experience of being a child. After all, we can access memories of times we had while growing up. In contrast, when it comes to empathizing and understanding the experience of growing old, we have no point of reference. Since we haven't been there yet, we don't have a clue what it is like to watch our memory fade, our bodies decline, and our close friends die on a regular basis.

There are other factors that work against our ability as an individual to "get it" when it comes to aging. We have a psychological desire to keep our distance from the elderly. In our youth-centered culture, we like to maintain the myth that aging is not for us. Too much closeness with the elderly begins to shatter this belief. The word *zenophobia* refers to an unconscious fear of people whom we perceive as different from ourselves. We act in America like we have a *zenophobia* for the elderly with whom we believe we have nothing in common!

The baby boomer generation is currently graying and they are determined to do so gracefully. There are a lot of them and they plan to grow old, "their way." Many of them will refuse to be warehoused in traditional nursing homes like their grandparents were. Because of medical improvements, many boomers will have an extended period of time as "young, old timers." They'll be fairly active, healthy, and mobile.

Currently, however, many boomers are struggling to cope with their own elderly parents, many of whom survived the Depression. These current elders (the old old timers) are filled with a belief that self-sufficiency is tantamount to pride. Hence, they are frequently too ashamed to ask for or assistance with their various needs. They would rather suffer in silence than impose on others to help with their finances, finding transportation, understanding living wills, relocating their home, etc. This has resulted in a very sad situation in our society. We have many isolated elderly people living alone and being treated as if they resided in some "foreign country."

In her book, *Another Country*, author and psychologist, Mary Pipher, describes how various cultural trends have contributed to so many older people living in isolation. As a psychologist, I have talked to many clients who are also struggling with ways to cope with their aging parents. Together, we've noted the lack of guidelines or strategies for dealing with topics such as chronic illness, physical and mental decline, the death of a life partner, etc. The emotional problems that arise for both them and their elderly loved ones takes a toll. This is often manifested in the form of anxiety and depression.

In her book, Pipher emphasizes "the importance of intergenerational contacts, the benefit of giving older people freedom to make their own choices and her resolute belief that

families can fortify the honesty and love they share through involvement in a dying parent's final months.”

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