



# Why are *transitions* so challenging for some older adults?

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# What are transitions?

- ▶ Noun: “the process or period of changing from one state or condition to another.” (Oxford Online Dictionary)
- ▶ Verb: “to undergo or cause to undergo a process or period of transition.” (Oxford Online Dictionary)
- ▶ Complexities of the process are not captured in the definition!

# Types of transitions experienced by older adults

- ▶ Retirement
- ▶ Chronic illness/physical and mental impairments
- ▶ Death of spouse or significant others
- ▶ Relocations (due to illness, death of spouse, natural disasters, war)
- ▶ Dying and death

# Case Study – Mrs. Sukhdev Dhaliwal

- ▶ Married woman, aged 63 years
- ▶ Husband travels on business, often away from home
- ▶ Recently retired – formerly a school teacher
- ▶ Retired due to diabetes, including some diabetic retinopathy and peripheral neuropathy... usually has pain
- ▶ Two adult children, ages 30 and 33 years of age
- ▶ Her daughter has a new baby, born three weeks ago

# Transitions experienced by Mrs. Dhaliwal

- ▶ Retirement
- ▶ Chronic illness/physical and mental impairments
- ▶ The future may bring others:
  - ▶ Death of spouse
  - ▶ Relocation, e.g. may live with her daughter
  - ▶ Dying and death

# What makes transitions so hard for Mrs. Dhaliwal and other older adults?

- ▶ Magnitude of life transitions (e.g. work to retirement, chronic illness leading to disability) (Was retiring her choice?)
- ▶ One transition may lead to many (a domino effect!)
- ▶ Some transitions occur together (birth of granddaughter and retirement)

# What makes transitions so hard for Mrs. Dhaliwal and other older adults?

- ▶ Impact of transitions on family members (including triggering old issues within families). How does her husband's travelling impact her now that she is not busy at work?
- ▶ Existential issues (issues of meaning and purpose in life). How does Mrs. Dhaliwal now define herself as a person?

What makes transitions so hard for Mrs. Dhaliwal and other older adults?

- ▶ Some of the coping methods used in previous transitions may not be accessible anymore (e.g. work, strenuous exercise, reading, relying upon others in the family for emotional and instrumental help)



# What makes transitions so hard for Mrs. Dhaliwal and other older adults?

- ▶ May have less physical and mental resources to cope (Mrs. Dhaliwal's chronic pain may wear on her ability to actively employ positive coping methods)
- ▶ Depending upon the geographical location in the world, resources for older adults may be scarce

# How can health and human service professionals respond to Mrs. Dhaliwal and others like her?

- ▶ Understand significance of transitions for older adults and family members... Mrs. Dhaliwal is going through life changing transitions, but so are her daughters and her husband
- ▶ Verbally acknowledge the difficulties of transitional periods (Mrs. Dhaliwal may be confused by how difficult this time is)

# How can health and human service professionals respond?

- ▶ Verbally acknowledge the emotional reactions to transitions and help family members process reactions...
- ▶ Mrs. Dhaliwal may feel anger, grief, relief, guilt, sadness, fear.... Emotions may feel like a tangled mass inside of her

# How can health and human service professionals respond?

- ▶ Help older adults and family members process existential issues, or refer them to a skilled professional (such as a spiritual leader or pastoral care professional)...
- ▶ Does Mrs. Dhaliwal have a spiritual leader who can “walk with her” to address current issues of meaning and future concerns?

# How can health and human service professionals respond?

- ▶ If transition results in relocating to an adult child's home, help family negotiate new rules/guidelines for living together
- ▶ While Mrs. Dhaliwal lives with her husband, will she need to stay with one of her daughters when he is away due to pain and vision problems? If so, how will they negotiate their relationships and rules and guidelines for living together?

# How can health and human service professionals respond?

- ▶ Encourage activities (such as volunteer work) that address need for meaning and purpose in life
- ▶ These may tie into areas of meaning for Mrs. Dhaliwal in the past, but must take into consideration her current health... activities do more than “busy work”, they help Mrs. Dhaliwal hold on to aspects of her identity that she views as integral to who she is

# How can health and human service professionals respond?

- ▶ Assess coping methods – be alert for signs of dependence upon substances... particularly important if Mrs. Dhaliwal did not want to retire.
- ▶ Help older adults find new coping methods if they are unable to use previous strategies (e.g. strenuous exercise)

# How can professionals respond? (Institutional level)

- ▶ Help older adults and family navigate through health care system (e.g. assessments for home care; options for care outside of home, such as assisted living, nursing homes and hospices)
- ▶ Offer information to older adults and family members about technology that allows older adults to age in place



# How can professionals respond? (Institutional level)

- ▶ Advocate for policies that address issues of access/care for marginalized sub-populations of older adults: those with HIV/AIDS, intellectually disabilities, the homeless and those who are in prison.

# Concluding Thoughts

- ▶ Not in his goals, but in his transitions is man great.  
(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

For more information, see:

Lane, A.M., Hirst, S.P., & Reed, M.B. (2013). Older adults: Understanding and facilitating transitions. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt