Aging: A dilemma or growing experience?

By DIANE ABRAMS

The sun's bright rays lit up the room where 13 concerned individuals sat in a semi-circle getting to know each other. They discussed what they wil do to pass the days once they enter their years of retirement.

Though each had come with reconceived views and expectations, at the end of six hours, each had a clearer understanding of the meaning of retirement.

The meeting, titled "Adjustment to Retirement," took place last month at the Continuum Center, a division of the Continuing Education department at Oakland University.

"The rationale for this particular continuum is to explain that entering the years of retirement touches on a normal developmental crisis," said Betty White, coordinator of the older adult projects. "It disrupts how we feel about ourselves and we often become unsure and unsettled. It's just like getting married or changing jobs. During decision making processes of this kind, it is helpful to get together with other people who are feeling the same things."

It did indeed prove helpful; giving those present an understanding of what they were going through. One member expressed relief after learning that others shared the same anxieties he does.

"I'm glad to know I'm going through a normal developmental crisis," he said. "I knew something was going on, but I didn't have a name for it."

One by one the members of the group shared their feelings and told how they plan to utilize newly acquired leisure time. The same fears were experienced by several of those present.

"I don't want to fill my days with card parties and soap operas," said Eva Miller, who has been retired for one year. "I want to do something meaningful. I was so used to getting up in the morning and going to work. I was scared to death wondering what I was going to do after I retired. It all works itself out though. The day takes care of itself."

"THE DAY DOESN'T TAKE CARE of itself," said co-lecturer Lucille Egstein. "You take care of the day."

That the 11 women and two men who attended came for a variety of reasons was evident. One thing they all had in common though, was a desire to earn more about the stage of life they were either in the midst of or about to enter.

Each participant was asked to tell the group why he had decided to come to the continuum. The openness and candor with which they spoke revealed a desire to communicate with others who also face the prospect of retiring.

As personal experiences unfolded a learning process began to take place, emanating not only from the lecturers but from within the group itself.

"I was forced to retire and found it to be a terribly unpleasant experience," said one member. "Since then, I've gone back to work. Now I'm going to find out how to retire, so that I'm more prepared the second time around."

Together White and Epstein strove to make their audience aware of the alternatives open to retirees. They also discussed the phenomena of aging and society's attitude toward retirment.

A negative attitude about retirement has emerged through a variety of myths, according to White. She claims that studies on aging deal primarily with physical aspects, rather than on the total person.

"MOST OF US have a dread of growing older because of myths that are perpetuated on television, in the media and literally everywhere. It must be emphasized that we are all capable of adjustment and adaptation," said White.

However, the anxiety of facing such a drastic change in the regularity of one's life is inevitable. Once the problems are brought out and dealt with openly, alternatives become apparent.

One member of the group expressed the security she felt while working and her reluctance to retire.

"The longer that I work, the more dependent on the job I become, and the harder it will be to stop later on."

By giving some thought to the years ahead, when the time for retirement arrives, it will be that much easier to deal with, said White. These years bring changes that surprise even those people who thought they were well prepared. Being able to differentiate between myths and realities is an important aspect of understanding this phase of life.

One such myth revolving around retirement, she claims, involves the reference to retirement as "the golden years of life." A number of changes and losses come with retirement, and though this time can in fact be a golden period, a certain degree of adjustment will previal. White discussed what she termed the "support group" concept.

"Support groups can be identified as the things and people that infringe upon your life. This is a dynamic process that goes on throughout the life span. Along with retirement, in many cases, comes a loss of work friends, income and sometimes the home," said White. "We need to be active and be able to replace or substitute these support groups."

During working hours individuals receive both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that together comprise job satisfaction. When individuals are no longer employed, a new means of attaining satisfaction must replace the old, explained White. She suggests a number of options, such as school, hobbies, the Peace Corps and building on careers.

'I'm glad to know I'm going through a normal developmental crisis. I knew something was going on, but I didn't have a name for it.'
–A retiree

"WE TRY TO STIMULATE ALTERNATIVES in an informal way. The decision making process is left up to the individual," said Epstein. "People need to determine their values and time frame. Then, on this basis, they are able to make the necessary decisions."

Physical deterioration seemed to be a major concern among those approaching retirement years. White said that much of the reason for these fears has been brought about by biased studies that compare young people with aging adults.

"Oftentimes, studies that compare the younger generation with their elders don't measure outside factors. Cultural differences, as well as educational differences and other stimuli, will affect the growth patterns of all individuals. A positive view is now emerging and we're learning that as we grow older there aren't necessarily major differences in our physical person," said White.

She continued to say, "Some physical changes are normal occurences, however, that come with aging. They don't have to slow us down though. We can always adapt."

Another factor that individuals entering retirement should be aware of is the phenomenon of self-hatred. This aspect is predominantly brought on by the attitudes of society, according to White.

"Group self-hatred was prevalent among blacks and Jews in the past due to the attitudes of society," she said. "This same phenomenon apparent today with senior citizens. As senior activities are often scorned by society, this attitude becomes the root of self-hatred in prospective retirees," explained White.

Since there is generally a shortage of information regarding retirement and aging, it is up to individuals to delve for answers on their own.

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"WE NEED TO BE ADVOCATES for ourselves. It is important to be assertive and keep active," said Epstein.

Several members of the group said they had previously tried to find organizations and literature that deal with retirement, but were unable to find anything of value.

"There is definitely a shortage of programs of this kind," said one group participant. "I've called several schools and counselling centers, but was unable to locate any such programs. Companies should conern themselves more with making their employees aware of benefits, and preparing them for retirement."

White suggested that those wishing to seek additional information should consult their physicians as well.

"We should be assertive about our medical needs too," she said. "Doctors are taught the same myths that we are; so it is important to find a doctor who can meet the special needs of elders."

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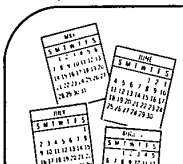

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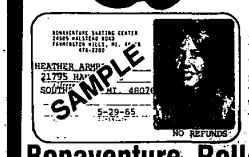

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