

Transitions: Senior to Elderly – Letting Go

By Kate McCarthy

People often make the mistake of assuming that old is old and that the elderly are done with the bewildering life changes that the rest of us are constantly adjusting to. In fact there are several developmental and emotional stages that those of advanced age commonly pass through as they transition from being a senior to being truly elderly. Although each individual differs in how they work through these stages, generally most progress through four psychological phases:

1) Slowing; 2) Life Review; 3) Transmission; and 4) Letting Go. The tasks of completing the

emotional work of each stage can be daunting for the elderly and their loved ones. Since it is often necessary for families to provide support to their elders as they transition through each stage, it is important to be able to recognize each step as they go through it.

4) Letting Go

The process of letting go is the culmination of all the previous developmental stages the elderly have pass through. Advanced age really begins with a marked slowing of physical and cognitive actions and that is followed by life review and transmission, which are like a general tidying up of one's unfinished business of life and passing on of their legacy of possessions and experiences. Then the serious business of letting go begins.



The aging process eventually leads to the stage of letting go.

The passing through of the different stages of advanced age slowly strips away all the extras of life, leaving the elderly with the task of just being. It is at this point the elderly deal with the task of letting go. The mission of letting go and learning how to just be is much more difficult than it sounds, especially in our fast paced and performance based culture. People at this stage of life let go of all the things people prize and value. Possessions, practicalities, behaviour patterns, logic processes and even words all fall to the wayside as the elder concentrates on the simplicity of just being. It is a vulnerable and emotional time for many. As an elderly person begins to let go, there is a concentrated clearness in their perceptions and tenderness in their hearts. The external trappings of life are stripped away and the beauty of existence is made clear. This is a time when small memories or little pleasures bring tremendous, almost childlike, joy.

Letting go is usually followed by a physical decline which leads to death. For a smooth transition the Elderly need a loving environment which supports and facilitates the emotional process of letting go. This is why family and friends are so important. As the Elderly become more aware of their own mortality, they attempt to hold themselves together to reduce their fears, anxieties, pain and panic. Having loving and patient support makes this task easier to accomplish.

The Elderly need to be able to transition through each stage of advanced age without being made to feel a burden on those around them. They need to be able to slow down without being considered a nuisance and reminisce through their life's perceptions and experiences without being thought of as a bore. They need to be allowed to let go of all the excesses of life without being considered witless. For an Elder to pass through these stages unaccompanied by the loving support of family or friends is a tragedy, for they are left alone and isolated as they face the most difficult of life's transitions – death.

Sources: "Emotion Regulation in Older Age" y Heather L. Urry and James J. Gross, www.aps.sagepub.com, 5/15/13
"The Psychological Tasks of Old Age" by Victoria Fitch, www.windhorseguild.org, 5/15/13.
"The Old-Old Years" by Brenda Sue Black, M.S., www.wvu.edu.com, 6/1/13.



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