Transitions, Teachable Moments, and Transformations: Walking a Mile in Their Shoes

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Abstract

This poster examines an ethnographic research study involving the admission of a twenty-year-old college student as a resident to a long-term care facility for eight days. Taking on the role of a ninety-year-old resident, the student was given several provisional diagnoses that came with the required intake of "medications" every day to comply with the management of her chronic conditions. Admission to the facility was due to a recent fall in her home, which mandated that the student ambulate with the assistance of a walker for the entirety of her stay. This experience brought about many transitional issues including a shift in previously held ideas about old age. The details of the findings for this discussion are framed around an interest in the prevalence of depression and loneliness among older adults in long-term care facilities. Finally, we will address the other aspects of this unique experience including the importance of community and the role that social support plays in our lives as we age, as well as opportunities and challenges from a faculty perspective.

Opportunities & Challenges

Student's Perspective:

- To gain a better understanding of a newly admitted resident
- To develop more empathy when working with older adults as a psychology/gerontology student and professional
- To examine the prevalence of loneliness and depression of residents admitted to geriatric care facilities
- Preparing for the experience – an opportunity and a challenge
- The experience – challenged views and perspectives

Professor's Perspective:

- Modeled after the Learning by Living © Project, designed and implemented by Dr. Marilyn R. Gugliucci in 2005
- The Walking a Mile in Their Shoes project explores life in a LTC facility from the perspective of undergraduate gerontology students
- This project utilizes a Qualitative Ethnographic and Biographic research design, whereby a "culture" is observed from the researcher (student) living within a unique environment/culture (LTC facility)
- Increase in awareness of the lived experience of older residents and increase sense of empathy
- Working with site and students presents a variety of opportunities and challenges – logistic and contextual

Methodology

- Each student resides in the LTC setting for 1 week (7 days), spanning at least one weekend day
- The student, NH administrator, and select staff are oriented and briefed prior to the pre-admission visit
- During the experience the student is immersed in the day-to-day life of a resident
- Once discharged there are a series of debriefings
- Constant review of student field notes is critical to ensure data collection is effective and meets qualitative research standards
- Data for this project is collected in the form of subjective and objective note taking (field notes)
- Student is provided feedback on a regular basis and there is regular contact
- Data is analyzed and categorized into themes revealing key impressions and experiences of life lived as a nursing home resident, relationships formed, and lessons learned
- Evaluation is ongoing as data is collected with each new student "admission"







Lessons Learned

Rather than looking at age as a predictor for the progression of loneliness, it is crucial to look at the losses surrounding the individual that could result in such feelings regardless of age.

There is so much that can be taken from our elders if we would take the time to sit down and listen.

Though we don't always have control over the losses and events that occur throughout our life, we do have control over how we chose to react and cope as a result.

Social Support plays an important role in the lives of older adults. There is value in recognizing how social support and community are often redefined in the context of the transition to a LTC setting.

Discussion

Social Isolation and Loneliness

• Social isolation accompanied with the further loss of independence that comes with admission into a long-term care facility may lead to feelings of loneliness.
• Rather than simply reflecting back on the observed loneliness of residents around me like anticipated, this experience allowed me the unique opportunity to reflect upon the progression on my own feelings of loneliness when taking on the role of an elderly woman.

Late-Life Depression

• The increasing diagnoses of psychological disorders in society today coupled with the increasing population of older adults has led to the perception of an increased prevalence of late-life depression. It is crucial to take into consideration however, that age in itself has little to do with the the onset of depression in the elderly.
• A combined loss of friends, loved ones, independence, as well as physical and mental health could trigger the onset of depression at any age.
• Rather than simply looking at old age as a predictor for loneliness and depression, this experience has taught me to look at the external factors surrounding the individual.
• Because losses cannot always be replaced, it is important to continually encourage social interaction and offer residents the maximum level of independence possible.

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