A LINE ON LIFE
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Growing Old or Merely Older? *
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Every winter, Yuma has a great influx of "*snowbirds*." Most of them are over 65. In fact, there are 21 million Americans over 65. By the year 2020, it is projected that some 40 million Americans (about one out of every six) will be 65 or older. Are these people "*old*"? Or are they just "*older*"?

There are two main theories, which try to explain the changes that occur with aging. One is **disengagement theory**, which assumes that it is normal and desirable for people to withdraw from society as they age. They need to adjust to decreasing physical strength, reduced income of retirement, the death of a spouse and friends, and meeting social and civic obligations within their ability. The theory says that elderly people welcome disengagement, since it relieves them of roles and responsibilities that they have become less able to fulfill. Essentially, this theory sees aging as an "*orderly retreat*."

In contrast, the **activity theory** assumes that *activity is the essence of life for people of all ages*. Thus people who remain active physically, mentally and socially will adjust better to aging. Therefore aging people should maintain activities of earlier years as long as possible. If activities must be given up, they can be replaced by others. In this way, the aging person can maintain a better self-image, greater satisfaction, and more social support — resulting in a happier style of life while aging.

> ## Throughout our life, we are in a process of letting go of outgrown activities and developing new goals.

Essentially, successful aging probably requires a *combination* of activity and disengagement. As in any age level, the elderly tend to disengage from activities that are no longer satisfying while maintaining those that are.

Older people differ among themselves in their **self-concept**. There is a difference between seeing one's self as "*old-old*" or "*young-old*." The young-old realize that they are aging, but they do not see themselves as "*old*" or accept the role of an "*old person*." In contrast, old-old persons are resigned to being old, and they see themselves as being "*old*." Thus, *age in years is not the essence of being "old."* Aging is an unavoidable, real event. In contrast, "*old age*" is a social convention. You are only as old as you think you are.

Dr. Alex Comfort is a **gerontologist** (jer-ON-TOL-o-jist, one who studies aging). He estimates that 25% of the disability of older people is medically based. The remaining 75% are social, political and cultural. Comfort believes that intelligence, creativity and productivity levels are likely to be maintained, when aging individuals remain active and suffer no major physical problems.

Comfort believes that the concept of "*oldness*" is used to expel people from useful work. He sees retirement, which typically cuts a person's income in half, as another name for dismissal and unemployment.

For those who are younger, the greatest threat of old age is the prospect of aging physically. However, it is a misconception to think that most elderly people are sickly, infirm or senile. In fact, only 5% of the elderly are in nursing homes.

In 1971, Dr. Bernice Neugarten examined the lives of 300 people aged 70-79. She found that 75% of them were satisfied with their lives after retirement. She also found evidence that contradicted other myths of aging.

1. Few elderly persons ever show signs of senility or mental decay, and only a few ever become mentally ill.

2. Old persons generally do not become isolated and rejected by their families. Most *prefer* to live apart from their children.

3. Old persons who live alone are not necessarily lonely or isolated.

4. Old persons are rarely in mental hospitals by uncaring children.

All in all, most of the elderly are integrated, active and psychologically healthy. Although they may tire more quickly and work more slowly than when they were younger, older people represent a valuable source of skills, knowledge and energy. Rather than rejecting them for being "*too old*," wouldn't it be better for everyone involved, if we made use of the resources they have?