

THE OLDER LEARNER

VOLUME 13 • NUMBER 2

Pages 3 and 8

SPRING 2005

ISSN: 1526-5072

www.asaging.org/learn

■ Women in Midlife and Old Age

What Two Generations Can Learn From Mutual Dialogue

by Phoebe Girard

Women seek inspiration and ideas about shaping their path to growing older from many sources. For better or for worse, the media exert a profound influence on women's view of aging and themselves. Women's experience with other women—primarily with their mothers and female family members, as well as occasionally with older friends—contributes significantly to their view of aging.

A potential, often overlooked source of learning about aging is conversation between women in midlife and older women. Such dialogue can provide an opportunity for women to reflect about and share insights on growing older.

With this type of interaction in mind, the Women to Women Project was designed to bring 50-year-old women together with women ages 75 and older to talk about their perceptions of aging. The project grew out of research conducted as part of the Geriatric Pastoral Care program at the Centers on Aging, Religion and Spirituality in St. Paul, Minn. A key focus of the research was learning about how women of different generations experience their own aging.

We found that women welcomed the opportunity to talk across generational lines, particularly since few opportunities for support and meaningful discussions about growing older had been available to them. Although U.S. culture offers a great deal of advice on ways to fight aging, it provides little in the way of models for constructive growth into a new phase of life.

Women in midlife are curious about what older women will have to say about aging, and they wonder whether they will be comfortable hearing what the older women have to say. The Women to Women Project provided middle-aged women a venue for voicing their fears about aging: concerns about their health, their finances and their acceptance of their changing physical selves.

Older women, we found, are more sanguine about their physical appearance and often about their health, but they share concerns about how society perceives older women—particularly frail older women. Because their existing friendships tend to be with women of their same age and experience, the older women taking part in the project welcomed the chance to relate to younger women. Both middle-aged and older women are looking for ways to continue to be vital and engaged and to explore ways to rechannel their passions to respond to changing interests, demands and energy levels.

SMALL-GROUP FORMAT

Intergenerational conversation is best conducted in an extended format, either in a daylong or weekend retreat. The Women to Women Project uses a small-group format of 10–12 women, which helps participants develop trust, have conversations throughout the day or weekend, and also have time for personal reflection and inner dialogue. To achieve the desired mix of middle-aged and older women, we've found that we often need to intentionally recruit older women, or at least offer incentives for middle-aged and older women to register as pairs.

How do women deal with cultural biases toward aging? In addition to the pressure to retain a youthful appearance, older women fear being invisible. Many women in retreats organized by the Women to Women Project talk about being disregarded, overlooked and discounted as gray-haired old ladies. Intergenerational dialogue is one opportunity to create both personal change and cultural change in the ways women choose to grow older.

As women delve into conversations about aging, what becomes clear is that their models of aging are often quite limited. Women in midlife reference their mothers' own aging, usually either in terms of avoiding at all costs the way their mother aged or by emulating their mother's exemplary later years. This black-and-white, "mother or not mother" attitude toward aging is a narrow approach to a complex process.

In the Women to Women Project, after members of the group share their own experiences, the group facilitator attempts to expand their views of aging with images, videos and resource material. As a result, the women involved in the project find models of aging that reach beyond their personal experience. By seeing the faces of other women and hearing about their life experiences and choices, women begin to perceive themselves in new and different ways and seek affirmation for choices that they may not have previously considered.

DEVELOPING POSITIVE IMAGES OF WOMEN AND AGING

In the five years since the inception of the Women to Women Project, retreats have been conducted at senior centers, community centers and local wellness programs, as well as with church congregations. Although a standard curriculum seemed too rigid for this small-group work, the wealth of material that is available can be tailored to a variety of settings. Time and time again, this conversational approach to learning about aging has shown how valuable an intergenerational discussion can be in the effort to develop more positive images of women and aging. ■

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