

The Developmental Tasks & Needs of Older Adults

1. Adjusting to decreasing physical health and strength.
2. Adjusting to retirement and reduced income.
3. Nurturing one another as husband and wife.
4. Caring for elderly relatives.
5. Maintaining contact with children and grandchildren.
6. Meeting social and civic responsibilities.
7. Establishing satisfactory housing arrangements.
8. Affiliating with one's age group.
9. Adjusting to death of spouse.
10. Finding meaning in life in the face of death.

from Albert L. Meiburg, "Senior Adulthood: Twilight or Dawn?"
In *Caring for Folks from Birth to Death*, ed. James E. Hightower, Jr.
(Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), p. 126.

I've lost the bibliographic citation for the moment, but Jess Love has identified six "Discovered Needs of the Aged," primarily dealing with the oldest adults as life comes to its conclusion:

1. The Need to be Heard

Aged persons often feel that life has been taken away such that they are no longer in control of decisions that affect them. Older persons sometimes perceive themselves to be becoming objects: objects of examination; objects of treatment; objects of nursing. Doctors discuss strategies with family members and families gather outside the doorway in hushed conversation.

When visitors come, protective family members escort the visitors out of the room to share the discussion and decisions of the family. Aged persons frequently confront crucial decisions related to medical care, personal care, financial arrangements, and housing needs, but when they are left out of these conversations, elders may feel powerless to offer any input into their future well-being. An aged shut-in may wonder, "Am I worth listening to? Does anyone care what I think?"

2. The Need to Express Anger

The need to express anger is fairly common among older adults who have lost control of their lives in institutional or other settings. Accumulated losses and frustrations often tumble out when aged persons believe someone is interested in really listening. Visitors may be perceived as "safe" listeners since they are not part of the institution or fellow residents who may report them to their families.

Anger may be present with older adults in settings in which children become the parents and the parents become the children with little authority to make their own decisions. Although children may indeed attempt to act in the best interest of their parents, the parents' loss of

control and decision-making may generate explosive resentment. When this anger remains unexpressed, the temperament of older persons can be greatly affected.

3. The Need to Tell Their Story

Older persons have a wealth of stories, and even though they may have told the stories many times, they still gain a great sense of satisfaction and self-esteem by sharing them again. Stories allow older persons to revisit those times long ago when they could run, play, and achieve. Aged persons remember the past well because they have a substantial past and have visited there often. Memory is a welcome place, for in those days they were independent and in control of their lives.

Sometimes the need to tell their stories becomes especially compelling, because such telling allows persons to confess painful secrets from years past so that they approach the future unencumbered. Sometimes the story may disclose hidden issues that are blocking emotional or spiritual health. Often a long needed healing can be effected by listening to the story.

4. The Need to be Needed

The question, “Why am I here?” highlights the struggle to find a purpose for the remainder of life. Often older adults have become so dependent on others that they see no need for their continued existence. Aged persons may state a preference to go to “be at home with the Lord,” since the next life is expected to be far better than anything they are presently experiencing.

Persons may ask if it is wrong for them to want to die. When an individual is sure of her relationship with God, and when the circumstances of life are extremely difficult, such a request of God seems reasonable.

Older persons need reassurance that their lives still have value. They want to know how they can still be helpful and useful in the service of the church and in the work of God’s kingdom. Prayer support is a vital ministry older adults can perform for their church. Older adults can also pass on the collective wisdom of their years to their family members, sometimes through audio or video recording.

5. The Need for Opportunity for Confession

Confession is an essential part of Christian faith, and all persons need the opportunity to confess. Often older people have a strong desire to ask for God’s forgiveness for something the past. Confession may tumble out in the midst of telling one’s life story, and with that confession and repentance comes the need for assurance of God’s forgiveness.

6. The Need for Final Order

Older adults often have a sense of urgency to ensure that they are “right with God” and with others as they prepare for death. They desire to bring final order and spiritual closure to their lives so that they will not have unfinished business on their minds. As older adults face the reality of impending death, they need the assurance of God’s continuing presence and the awareness that God is the Lord of both present and eternal realities.