

Program 09

Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Man

Older men meeting the challenge of finding meaning and identity after employment

In Programs 09 and 10, we look closely at men's learning in later life. In this first program, we visit the Eastwood Community Centre in suburban Adelaide, and hear from Community Development Officer Sue Ross. We also hear from Professor Barry Golding from Federation University in Ballarat Victoria and National President of Adult Learning Australia. Professor Barry Golding is also Patron of the Australian Men's Shed Association. Both Sue Ross and Barry Golding look specifically at learning in a community context – community centres and men's sheds.

Interviewees

Professor Barry Golding

Sue Ross

Discussion Starter

All of us depend on having some clear sense of self-identity and a way of representing and describing ourselves whether in our own family and social circle, or in the wider world. For men this almost invariably involves occupation – the kind of work they do. We frequently ask men 'what do you do', or, 'where do you work', which is our way and theirs of situating them in the world in a meaningful way.

For men, work isn't just a source of income, it is also a means of giving expression to their innate action orientation – their need to be creatively, productively, and constructively active. Through work, men experience value, value themselves, and feel valued by others. A workplace, for men, is also a vital and yet often unrecognised source of social interaction and social inclusion. For many men, life without work is a life with little value and meaning, and a life prone to isolation and declining physical and mental health.

To be suddenly exiled from a life (whether through retirement redundancy, or unemployment) you've invested so much in, and that has contributed so much to your self-identity, status, sense of purpose, meaning, and social belonging, is no simple change. It's a major life transition, and one that brings with it many losses to be grieved, new tasks and challenges of adjustment and adaptation, and unexpected stresses.

But there's no good reason why life can't remain meaningful, healthy, with a momentum of continuing creative and productive engagement, so long as some measure of meaningful work remains part of the equation. And work does not necessarily need to be monetarily remunerative like job or employment; and this is a vital distinction, because work may receive validation and payment of different kinds, such as the appreciation of others who benefit from it, simply knowing that one is creating something useful or aesthetically pleasing, or that in some way it contributes to the greater good.

If such work also permits men to purposefully work alongside each other and as a secondary outcome, interact socially with each other and find companionship in shared or collaborative tasks, then a potentially personally satisfying and supportive combination has been achieved.

Of course, work of paid employment tends to be specialized and may be routine for many years of a man's life, whereas engaging in work and living meaningfully after occupation or employment will often not only require acquiring new knowledge and skills (or significantly adapting existing capacities) of a practical nature, but will also likely demand acquiring knowledge and skills of the kind that are more personally challenging – those that apply to living one's life differently and being able to relate in new ways to one's spouse, partner, and workmates.

In sum, new learning that equips men for a new place in the world and to function in a new context of social relationships and meaningful activity or work. Age is no barrier to continuing to learn, change and evolve as individuals. In fact, continuous learning is required of all of us if we are to adapt to our changing life circumstances and remain healthily and happily engaged with life.

Questions

1. *Volunteering is not always viewed or valued like work that is waged. How can we get past this and begin to genuinely acknowledge the expertise, experience, and commitment to work that volunteers can bring to organisations and communities?*
2. *What are the differences between men and women with respect to how they experience life after being fully engaged in a paid workforce?*
3. *What is it about what we demand of men as a society, that makes it difficult for them to sometimes recognise their own legitimate social and psychological needs?*

Related Resources

Men Learning Through Life. Edited by Barry Golding, Rob Mark and Annette Foley, NIACE 2014

Men's Sheds – A Strategy to Improve Men's Health. Gary Misan et al. University of South Australia 2008

Project Consultant

Dr John Ashfield