

OLD AGE - PSYCHO SEXUAL ADJUSTMENT

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The old age is a closing period in life span, the time when the individual looks back on life, lives on present accomplishments and begins to finish off his life course. Because old age is a period of decline, whether slow or rapid, it gives rise to the belief that the individual has entered his "second childhood."

The sexual lives of the elderly has more often been the subject of joke rather than a serious study. Now a days, there is increased sensitivity to the sexual needs and pleasures of older people. A sociologist writing for a popular retirement oriented magazine noted that in one community of 10,000 older people, problems involving sex were brought to the therapist about twice as often as any thing else (Peterson 1971, cited in Puner 1974). The informed public is no longer shocked to read of marriages between nursing home of residents or of living together arrangements among older unmarried couples.

Master and Johnson and virtually every modern authority agrees that healthy older people are able, and usually interested in participating in sexual activity.

Factors that influence the expression of sexuality in old age are biological and psychological changes, i.e. to some old people, the superficial changes in overt appearance, wrinkling and sagging of skin, baldness and so on contribute to a negative self image that reduces the desire to seek sexual encounters. Biological changes also contribute directly to sexual testosterone for men and oestrogen for women which begin in middle adulthood and continue to alter this structure and func-

tioning of reproductive organ in old age. For women, the walls of vagina become thinner and shorter. Orgasm is generally shorter and less intense (Weg 1978). For men, more direct stimulation is necessary to achieve erection, and time taken for full erection is longer. Despite the biological changes, older men and women are still capable of an active sexual life and their experience is still extremely satisfying on performance, the older person appears to be more concerned with pleasure (Kaplan 1977).

Sexuality in old age is also complicated by medical problems. Diabetes, hypothyroidism, arthritis, alcoholism, dependence and obesity, to name a few health related factors, quietly contribute to a decreased sexual desire and at times even to impotence. Certain surgical procedures are also linked to sexual problems in the elderly. Similarly older women sometimes lose interest in sexual activity following hysterectomy, not because of some medical complication, but because of myth surrounding surgery (Jacobson 1974). A number of psychological factors contribute to sexual expression in older adults. Most of the sexual activity takes place within marriage. The older man fears exposure and failure with an unfamiliar woman.

The sexual expression of older people is varied. The expression of sexuality is not dependent upon the sexual act. If it were, we would be sexless creatures until the age at which the norms of our particular society granted us a sexual partner- until mid or late adolescence in the society. (Most people agree that sexuality exists in some form from the beginning of the life.) When sexuality is not limited to genital expression it intends to involve other aspects of the personality, particularly the imagination. It is

the older person (and the frustrated adolescent) who has a reputation for fantasy and for being interested in pornography and erotic act.

It is a popular belief that old age brings loss of interest in sex. Further more, social factors make many aged men and women feel that showing interest of any sort in sexual matters is not nice, "and that such interest should be limited to younger people." When the individual passes middle age, any behaviour of a sexual sort is regarded by many people as a form of sexual perversion. For example, friends and relatives react with consternation if an older widow or widower falls prey to an obvious sexual affair. As a result, many older couples court in an atmosphere of secrecy and near shame, when interviewed about the marriages they pointedly avoid mentioning sex, referring instead to "Companionship."

There is a decrease in frequency of coitus and increase in their sexual outlets. One indication of senility is, sexual recrudescence or foolish infatuation on the part of elderly people for young people of the opposite sex. This may be diffused or localised in love object. Among men, it usually takes the form of attraction, sometimes even towards the girls much younger to their age. At times, older men even marry the girls young enough to be their grand-daughters. Aged women may play with dolls or take a keen interest in dealings with younger men.

References

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