

Successful Aging

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Abstract

*My work with a Community Member in the Adult Health & Development Program (AHDP) is described. My member was an example of **successful aging** who believes that her lifestyle significantly affects her health. Emphasis was placed upon AHDP concepts such as the ACAEM and Friendly Coach paradigms, and Symbolic Interaction Theory, and what I, a health education graduate student, gained by participating as a staffer.*

Introduction

“Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven’t had that, what have you had?”

Henry James, *The Ambassadors*

I have learned so much about life and living from my experiences in the program. I was paired with one of the most phenomenal women I have ever met. While I taught her many things and encouraged her to try new things, she also became my teacher, supporter, and friend. Ms. Joan Bennett’s¹ chronological age is 73 years, but she has the spirit and energy of a 25-year old. Her philosophy is that life is too short to just watch it pass. She always jumps into life, new activities, adventures, and more. I am continually amazed at her perseverance, her commitment to the program and to her other activities, and the depth of her smile which stretches from deep within her to everyone she meets. I think that she is an example of healthy or successful aging (Rowe, 1997; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). She is also an example of how life style is related to health and sense of well-being.

How We Met

Joan came to the program this semester [spring 1998] after reading an advertisement in the newspaper. She is always looking for new opportunities, and wanted to begin an exercise regimen to increase her strength. Joan was shot in a rifle accident when she was young, and the right side of her body has never quite caught up to the development of her left side. When she read about the program, she decided to find out how the AHDP could help her.

The first day of the program I mingled and searched for someone who I could help and who would

mesh well with my personality and my talents. Surprisingly, I found so many members² who were energetic, happy, friendly, and excited about the opportunities and activities of the Adult Health and Development Program. I could have easily worked with any one of them and had a positive and wonderful semester. However, once I spotted Joan and had the chance to talk with her, I knew that I had found a very special woman.

The Active Lifestyle

In only a few moments, I understood the joy, excitement, and meaning that she had created in her life. She plays golf two or three times per week (walking, of course!), works one day per week as a business manager, walks three miles most mornings, takes Spanish lessons, does quilting and other crafts, travels all over visiting her children and grandchildren, and even spends time every day reading and writing e-mail! She truly is amazing! I knew instantly that I wanted to work with Joan this semester. I hope that I will be like Joan when I am in my seventies!

Joan arrived to the program hoping to make positive changes in her physical fitness. She is very active with walking, playing golf, mowing the lawn, doing gardening, and more. However, because of her childhood accident, she has much less strength in the right side of her body. It does not greatly affect her life, but she notices that she often compensates for her right side by doing more with her left side. Her right leg and foot are a bit “lazier” than her left, and several times during our walks around campus, she would catch her foot on the ground and it would cause her to trip. She does have fairly good balance, and she was always stopped herself from falling. She refers to those trips as “air bumps” that she did not see! When

¹ Names have been changed. Also, this Final Analysis Paper was written by a first semester staffer during the spring 1998 semester. Editing was minimal.

² Members fall into four categories: Those residing in the Community; a sub-group of the Foreign-born (matched with bi-lingual staffers), people with developmental disabilities, and VA Nursing Home residents nearly all of whom use wheelchairs.

we did get into the gym on that first day, I was surprised at the strength she possessed. While her left side was noticeably stronger, overall she was much stronger than I imagined.

Joan is very psychologically healthy. She lives alone and is fully capable of taking care of her house and herself. She has all of her “wits” about her, and manages very well. She has been a widow for 17 years, and has adjusted extremely well to losing her husband and living alone. She keeps herself so busy with activities and adventures that she does not have time to be bored or depressed. She has a very healthy outlook on life and keeps her days filled with joy and happiness.

Joan is very active and involved with her friends, family, and neighbors. She has a wonderful social support network to provide her with advice, assistance, friendship and love. Joan is also great at giving those things to others. She spends many hours on the phone and on the computer staying in contact with her loved ones. She is very active in her church and in a quilting circle, two groups that give her much joy and support. She enjoys spending time with friends, but she also enjoys her independence and her free time. She likes to play golf by herself so that she can relax, practice her game, and play at her own pace. However, she will not refuse an offer to play with a friend or a new acquaintance. She enjoys being around people, and never misses an opportunity to make a new friend (like me!).

Joan’s doctors must be some of the proudest bunch of physicians because their job is simple! Joan does not have any medical problems, and she is not taking any medications. She often told me, “You only get one body, so you’d better take good care of it!” She credits her good health to a joyful outlook on life, lots of physical activity, and a nutritious diet including lots of fruits, vegetables, low-fat items, and CHOCOLATE!

Joan and I did not talk much about her finances. However, from her stories about going to plays, traveling to Florida, and buying presents for her family, I believe that she is very financially comfortable. She has a beautiful home in Silver Spring and can afford to keep it looking wonderful. She is very smart with her money, however. She probably got that quality from her parents. Her parents raised a family of seven during the Great Depression. They learned how to be frugal while still enjoying life. These qualities have kept Joan very financially secure throughout her life.

My Role as a “Friendly Coach”

Overall, Joan began the program as a very healthy woman. However, she knows that there is always room for improvement. We only spent seven Saturdays together, but I saw remarkable improvements in Joan’s physical fitness. We spent most of our Saturdays walking around campus and lifting weights in the new recreation facility. Joan did not know anything about resistance training, so I was able to coach her in this area. I also worked up a program of resistance exercises for Joan to do at home so that she could continue to strengthen her muscles outside of the program. This program included push-ups, sit-ups, modified squats, and resistance exercises using filled milk jugs and 8-pound weights.

I noticed that Joan puts 100% effort into whatever she does. She was willing to try whatever exercises I suggested, and usually mastered new exercise machines within a few sessions. Because of her hard work and our training modifications, her legs became significantly stronger. Her left leg is still stronger than her right, but we did our best to even them out a bit. Her back is also very strong, she went from lifting 30 pounds to lifting 55 pounds on the Cybex row machine. I was amazed at her progress! We walked over to the Physical Activities Center every Saturday, and would often take the long way just to be outside for a longer time. She shared with me that she loves to walk, and she even started jogging for a half mile at the end of her morning walks. Amazing!

I did not notice too many other improvements in Joan’s health, mostly because she was at a high level of health and fitness to begin with.

Me As a Change Agent

Ours has been a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship. Joan shared with me many stories, personal insights, goals, exciting adventures, and lots more. She probably helped improve my health by being such a positive role model and an optimistic friend. Joan always had a big smile on her face and a twinkle in her eye, which I believe brightened up the spirit of everyone she came in contact with. I noticed a “Joan Effect” in the weight room. Joan was having such a good time and was so excited to be exercising that she made everyone else smile!

I served as an agent for change in Joan because I was a constant source of information, support, and encouragement. I used my personal training skills, my counseling skills, my listening skills, and my teaching skills to help Joan make improvements in her life. I

think one of the best things I did was listen to Joan. I was constantly asking her how she was doing, if she was carrying on her exercise regimen at home, if she felt comfortable with the amount of weight we were using, if the weight was causing her pain, if she was ready to try a new exercise and more.

My first priority was her safety, and then it was her physical fitness progress. However, I would never have been able to keep Joan interested in a training program or in strengthening her body if I had not spend so much of my time listening to her needs, her desires, her concerns, and her successes. Once I knew how she was feeling and doing, I could tailor our goals to fit her needs and her comfort zone. I have learned that tailoring a program to a member is a very important part of changing behaviors and health. Joan would have given up if I had forced her to lift too much weight too quickly, or if I had chosen exercises that made her feel uncomfortable, or if I had not given her appropriate support and encouragement. By listening to her wishes and needs, we were able to have a very successful semester!

Insights

As a staffer, I learned a great deal about myself, about aging, about will power, and about successful leadership and teamwork. I learned that I do have the power and the knowledge to positively impact another person. While it was always fun to be around Joan, it was also hard work. I was constantly listening, watching, modifying, and more. I constantly used the ACAEM paradigm to assess Joan's progress and determine our course of action. I learned that I do have what it takes to successfully work with older adults.

Actually, I enjoyed it much more than I thought I would. I knew I really wanted a Community Member, but through my interaction with other members from other groups, I realized that I could positively affect any member from any of the groups. Each group, the Foreign Born, the Developmentally Challenged, and the Veterans, has unique gifts and talents. I have learned that all members are special, and that all staffers have the potential to help any member with whom they link up.

I remember making Pinatas standing at the same table with Joan, a Hispanic woman, and a developmentally challenged woman. We were four different individuals, but we managed to communicate wonderfully. We all knew the goal for the project, and we found a way to combine our talents to complete one pinata. All I had to do was hold the balloon and

encourage the other three members to work as a team. I did a fair amount of coaching that morning, but the members deserve all the credit for the beautiful pinata. It's amazing what can be done when individuals work as a team.

"There is no I in TEAM." Throughout these past eight weeks, I saw this trite slogan in action. I watched the staffers work as a team to make different projects successful. I saw staffers, senior staffers, and leaders work together to ensure the safety, well-being, and success of the members. I have also seen members work together to accomplish different tasks. I am continually amazed at the selflessness of everyone in the program. One of the greatest things I have learned is that no task is too hard, no mountain too high, and no goal too impossible when you have supportive friends to help you out along the way!

My experiences within the *AHDP* have given me a few new goals for my life. I have always had a very long list of things I want to accomplish in my lifetime. Well, Joan added another one to that list. I was contemplating taking my personal trainer certification test for a few years. However, I was not excited about receiving my certification and picking up clients in a commercial fitness club. The problem is that many younger clients are interested in working out hard and fast, and they want to see results immediately. They are very anxious about their workouts and the results, and they often don't really stop to enjoy the process of resistance training.

However, working with Joan has reminded me that some people are genuinely curious about resistance training, and how it can be used to improve physical health and quality of life. Joan was not a "muscle head," concerned only about getting big muscles and looking good. Instead, she was interested in improving her strength and balance, learning new things about resistance training, and **HAVING FUN** in the process. And believe me, we had fun. Some days Joan had to stop lifting because we were laughing too hard about something. She would often call herself an amazon woman, or comment that she was going to challenge her grandsons to arm wrestling at the next family gathering. One week I taught her how to grunt when she was lifting a really heavy weight. She's a great grunter. She was so excited about what we were doing, and she was delighted with any and all results. Because of Joan, I will take my certification test, and get an additional certification in training older adults. I would like to be able to work with people like Joan all the time!

The Application of AHDP Theory

I think that much of the theory and data presented in the program fit very well with my work with Joan. I relied heavily upon the ACAEM³ paradigm to make and achieve goals with Joan. For example, one week I assessed that Joan was getting a bit bored with our weight machine routine. I decided to modify the routine. Instead of having Joan use the Cybex equipment to work her chest muscles, I challenged her to lift the barbell like the “big guys”. She thought I was kidding, until I showed her exactly how to lift the bar off of the rack and lower it towards her chest. She didn’t think she would be able to do it, but I wanted her to try.

I relied on the *Coaching Model* to help her achieve success. First, I assured her that she had lots of strength in her upper body. Second, I *showed* her exactly how to do the exercise. When she took the position on the bench, I gently helped her lift the bar off the rack, *encouraging* her all the way. She still didn’t think she could do it, so I *modified* my plan and told her that we would try the exercise with a lot of help from me! With my hands on the bar as a spotter, Joan was able to successfully lower and raise the bar 7 times. Amazing. She was so proud of herself. Six weeks earlier, she never thought that she would be able to do that, but thanks to some great theories and concepts, I helped her to master the bench press.

Symbolic Interaction Theory (SIT) helped me to understand how Joan felt in new situations, and how I might best help her to achieve our goals. I put myself in her shoes, those of an older adult woman who had never set foot in a weight room. Once I empathized with her situation, it became much easier to make plans and goals for our time together. I’ve learned that there are so many things that *mean* very different things to different people. SIT has reminded me to carefully assess every situation, ask questions to understand everyone’s language about a certain situation, and empathize with other people.

³ The A(ssessment), C(reatvity), A(ction), E(valuation), M(odification) concept is useful in focusing the staffer upon his or her member’s needs and desires, and to subsequently develop an individualized program of physical and social activities, and health education.

Our Small Group

My small group was an integral part of my development and learning within the program. My Group Leaders (GL), Sammie, Mike and Grace, were very supportive and interested in everyone’s experiences. Because of their enthusiasm, and guidance of each staffer, we were always willing to give our last bit of energy to our small group discussions, planning, and critique. I think that they complemented each other well; where one leader left off, another would pick up and continue. I know it was hard for everyone to make it to class on Saturdays. I noticed that sometimes bits and pieces of the small group meetings could have been better if all the leaders had been there to provide insight or ideas, or if there had been a bit more communication between leaders before Saturday came around. This is not really a huge problem, just something I noticed. Overall, our leaders were very helpful, energetic, and fun. These three qualities are very important to motivate a group of college students to come to class and give 100% every Saturday.

Conclusion

As a whole, I think the *AHDP* is an invaluable part of the University of Maryland and the College Park Community. There is no other organization or program on campus that brings together such diverse participants and students with so much energy. I am awed each week at the joy, excitement, and enthusiasm that bounce off of the walls of Cole Field House.

I do believe that the program is well run and fun. The program offers an opportunity like none other I have had at College Park. As a graduate student, I am expected to sit in many three hour classes listening to professors (usually rather boring) discuss theories and models and examples of health education. The *AHDP* was a welcome diversion from those lecture classes. It has enabled me to get some hands on experience and to develop my skills as a health education practitioner with the older adult population. This has been a wonderful semester — and a most enjoyable break from the traditional classroom experience.

References

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