

Article 7

Gero-Counselor Prepare: The Silver Tsunami Is Headed Our Way

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1945: It was a time of greats. The *Great War* had just ended and the *greatest generation* (Brokaw, 1998) was headed home victorious. The *greatest* numbers of women were also returning home from working in the factories that helped to win the War. Together, those who fought and those who supplied them came together to build homes and families that produced the *greatest* number of children born in an 18-year period that this country has ever known.

Little did these parents of the 76,000,000 children born between 1946 and 1964 know what challenges their progeny would produce in the future. These enormous numbers of people have become known, for obvious reasons, as the baby boomers.

Now, in 2005, as the first wave of this 25% of the U.S. population turns 60 years of age in 2006, their very numbers will cause tremendous challenges to society, the economy, health care, retirement sources in general, and to our profession of counseling in particular.

Rationale

The phenomenon of the baby boomers, by virtue of their numbers, are described throughout this article, as the Silver Tsunami. When considering the number born in their parents' generation – the silent generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000) – were only 30 million, and those in the following 20 years—Generation X—constituted only 36 million, it is understandable that while those two generations preceding and subsequent could be described as waves, baby boomers are a tsunami. Further, according to Morgan (1998), the boomers, who will be between 55 and 60 in the year 2006, are the *largest 5-year age group born in the 20th century*. The appearance of such a large population bubble—containing a record number of older persons—led Wong (2002) to comment, “If aging was a disease in this country, public health might declare it a national epidemic” (p. 3).

These comments are shared to bring attention to the purpose of this article. This Silver Tsunami will be in great need for personal counseling in a vast variety of areas.

Current and Future Challenges for Boomers

In 2002-03, over 60% of the American public saw the bulk of their retirement savings and investments dwindle. A significant number of these Americans are baby boomers. This economic issue and others, according to Moen (1998), are causing baby boomers to “reconfigure the nature of work, family, and retirement” (p. 43). Further, baby boomers are changing the shape and scope of retirement (Simon-Rusinowitz, Wilson, Marko, Krack, & Welch, 1998). According to Lou Dobbs (2004) of CNN, 76% of baby boomers expect to work full or part time well into their 70s.

Beyond their economic issues shared with earlier generations, relationship difficulties are more prevalent among baby boomers than any generation that preceded them. According to the U. S. Bureau of Population Statistics (2000), the divorce rate in the U. S. has grown from 26% of marriages in 1960 to 58% of marriages in 2000. This group has availed themselves of the services of relationship or couples counseling more than any other group. More recently, according to Davis Crary (2004) of the Associated Press, “as baby boomers approach their 60s, the elderly and their concerns will inevitably move higher on the national agenda.”

In addition, although baby boomers will be in need of counseling for these concerns, there is another concern unique to their generation, that of their innate refusal to grow old (Crary, 2004).

In a recent review of counselor education programs accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), it was noted that only two institutions in the country have accredited gerontological counseling programs. Apparently we are neither prepared nor trained for the onslaught of the Silver Tsunami. Some graduate programs offer individual courses in aspects of gerontological counseling, but if practitioners are to meet the rapidly increasing counseling needs of baby boomers, more attention must be given to training these professionals, and current counseling practitioners must become alert to the concern. Three of the most current methods of drawing attention to these issues about the challenges

facing baby boomers are through convention presentations at ACA, through continued research, and publications (Maples & Abney, in press).

Developing a Training Curriculum

There are several publications related to effective training curricula for gerontological counselor education (Myers, 1996; 2003). However, counselor educators, as well as the general public, need to understand the uniqueness of this generation. It appears that the experts who write of this group cite their differences from earlier generations, as found in their creativity (Kastenbaum, 1992), their attitude (Chesser, 2003), their positivism (Ponzo, 1992) and their wellness (Myers, 1996; 2003). Kastenbaum described the creativity boomers will bring to their later years. In refuting that creativity must be assessed and evaluated as “abilities,” Kastenbaum asked “Why do we not see creativity as multidimensional instead of limited to achievement through abilities? We must understated the *meanings* and *functions* of creativity in the later years” (1992, p. 291). Chesser (2003) referred to aging well as a matter of attitude. In her interview with George Vaillant, a prominent geriatric physician, she concluded that “Growing old gracefully is not about a plastic surgeon, a happy childhood, or even a whopping IRA, it is about attitude” (p. 96). Ponzo (1992) wrote that successful aging is described as staying vital longer by reaching for and emphasizing the positive aspects of life, of seeing what is possible rather than what is typical or expected. One of the skills that counselor training curricula must focus upon in counselor preparation is the tools by which to empower older people. This also calls for the training curricula to help counseling students to reduce stereotypes historically attached to aging.

Theories, Guiding Principles, and Competencies for Gerontological Counseling

The ACA program in Atlanta emphasized the Contextual Dimensions of Gerontological Counseling espoused by CACREP, as well as the applications of Cognitive Therapy and Life Review suggested by Weiss (1995). Capuzzi and Gross (2002) offered several group theories and approaches applicable to aging baby boomers, such as reality orientation, milieu therapy, reminiscence groups, and remotivation therapy. There appear, then, a variety of theoretical applications in the training curricula.

The fact that this generation is expecting to live well into their 80s tends to reinforce the need for a specialty in the counseling of older adults. The 2001

CACREP *Standards Manual* stresses the need for skills, techniques, and practices beyond the scope of the generalist counselor. The fact that the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population is that group over 85 indicates that new students of counseling need to be made aware of this specialty, and that the current practitioners with an interest in working with the upcoming elders must find programs that will increase their competence in counseling the aging baby boomers. Altekruze and Ray (1998) identified several principles and recommendations for application to counseling mature adults, including the following:

- Counselors need to demonstrate the benefits of counseling to the boomers, and should be cautious in the use of tests with this population.
- Counselors must respect and enhance the dignity and worth of older persons, and be appreciative of their intelligence as well as their age differences.
- Counselors must attend to the physical environment of counseling more than with younger clients.
- Counselors must serve more actively in the role of client advocate, and attend to the dependence/independence issue while working with older adults.
- Counselors might help older clients to focus on short-term goals, emphasizing the present life of the client.
- Counselors need to be especially aware of and sensitive to the cultural, environmental and value differences between themselves and their clients, and to possess some perspective on the clients’ place in history, particularly if there is a so-called generation gap between them.

Guided by theories and principles, gerontological counselors must develop competencies necessary for working effectively with aging baby boomers. Myers (1996) recommended 16 minimal essential competencies for a gerontological counseling specialist. Most appealing about Myers’ approach to counseling is her wellness philosophy. Traditional work with older people has focused on reactive and curative attitudes. Myers (2003) in an ACA presentation entitled “Wellness in Later Life” brought attention to the unique nature of the new older people, the baby boomers: that of hope for the future.

Myers’ (1996) gerontological counselor, having been trained according to CACREP Standards (2001), will demonstrate and actively advocate for positive,

respectful wellness enhancing attitudes toward older persons and a concern for empowerment of persons throughout the life span. Myers' gerontological counselor will also demonstrate

- skill in applying extensive knowledge of development for older persons including major theories of aging, the relationship between mental health and aging, the difference between normal and pathological aging processes, gender-related developmental differences, and coping skills for life's transitions and losses;
- skill in applying extensive knowledge of social and cultural foundations for older persons, including characteristics and needs of older minority subgroups, factors affecting substance and medication misuse and abuse, recognition and treatment of elder abuse, and knowledge of specific social service programs designed for this group;
- skill in recruiting, selecting, planning, and implementing groups with older persons;
- skill in applying extensive knowledge of career and lifestyle options for older persons;
- skill in applying current research related to this population;
- skill in applying extensive knowledge of the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, vocational, and spiritual needs of older persons;
- skill in applying appropriate intervention techniques, in collaboration with the medical community, for psychological impairments such as depression, suicide ideation, and organic brain syndrome;
- skill in use and application of a wide variety of therapies such as art, pet therapies, and peer counseling for use in coping with developmental and nonnormative issues; and
- skill in applying extensive knowledge of ethical issues in counseling older persons.

These are a few of the wellness-oriented competencies necessary for effective counseling which will address the unique needs and concerns that will confront 76,000,000 Americans in the next 20 years.

The purpose of this article is to alert our counseling profession and practitioners to the need to work with this unique and amazing generation of current

and future clients in a knowledgeable, skilled, and enthusiastic manner. Keys to effectiveness and success in empowering this generation are creativity, attitude, positivism, and wellness. Increasing numbers of highly skilled counselors will be needed to address the mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual issues of this challenging group.

Bortz (1990) stated a theme or philosophy for growing older: "Aging is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we dread growing old, thinking of it as a time of forgetfulness and physical deterioration, then it is so likely to be just that. On the other hand, if we expect it to be full of energy and anticipate that our lives will be rich with new adventures and insight, then that is the likely reality. *We prescribe who we are. We prescribe what we are to become*" (p. 55).

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