

After retirement

December 1993—Senior World/Los Angeles—Page 3

Gerontologist helps couples with changes

By Cindy Skalsky
Correspondent

The farewell lunch and gold watch are tangible proof that your days of punching the time clock or pulling into your reserved parking space are over. The term, "pre-retirement planning," while not as prevalent as the concrete symbols, generally means reviewing and organizing insurance, pensions, benefits and investments to make sure your financial house is in order once the paychecks stop coming.

Marriage and change

But what often goes unaddressed is how this major life transition reverberates on a marriage, on a person's sense of self, and the structuring of time and leisure activities. With people retiring at earlier ages and living longer, as much as one-third of an individual's life may be spent in retirement.

"Retirement frequently sparks changes in status and social roles," said Dr. Gail S. Eisen, a former Department of Psychology faculty member at California State University at Los Angeles. "It can disrupt personal schedules, friendship networks and changes in relationships with immediate family members," she said.

"The potential stress is remarkable."

How to alleviate conflict

To help understand and alleviate conflicts arising from such a change, Eisen, who currently works as a consultant in gerontology and pre-retirement planning, has created a two-day program for pre-retirees offered through the UCLA Extension. Titled, *Psychology of Retirement: Meeting the Emotional and Social Challenges*, the activity scheduled for January 22 and 23 marks the 4th year she has presented the popular workshop aimed at couples hoping to enjoy a fulfilling and harmonious retirement.

Eisen points out that American society, with the high value it places on the work ethic, sends "messages" that make it difficult for some people to be comfortable in retirement or even leisure activities — so strongly do they identify with their jobs.

"Some people go for many years without hobbies or outside interests," she said, "and then they need to find ways of filling anywhere from 40 to 60 hours each week that had previously been spent on the job. Sometimes loss of role equals loss of self-esteem."

Studied relationships

While the style of the workshop is participatory and non-academic, much of the subject matter and information is based on her own doctoral dissertation research project. Eisen studied the marital relationships and life at home among 56 couples where the husband had retired from a fulltime occupation within the previous six to 20 months.

"Retirement is a very subjective experience," she said. "No two individuals react the same way. Some feel a sense of liberation and some feel a sense of loss — and their spouses may feel very differently than the retiree does. Certain problems arise. We talk about this in the class."

Issues involved

Some of the specific issues involve privacy, personal space, and what she calls, "separation strategies." The idea is to make sure that each partner in the marriage continues to enjoy individual dignity and personal freedom, despite the increased proximity.

In the research study, wives frequently reported negative reactions to increased shared activities and a disruption of personal routine. They also experienced little difference in how domestic tasks were divided in the household.

Eisen's practical suggestions and solutions often come from her "subject" couples: "One man established his weekly library day — staying current on all the journals and periodicals in the computer field," she said. "Another had access to his old office, and would go there two or three afternoons a week to read or write letters."

Other strategies

Other examples of separation strategies were couples who enrolled in different adult education or community college classes, then go out afterward for coffee to discuss what they'd learned. Others signed up for volunteer work in the same organization, but performed different functions.

One of her favorite examples is of a couple where the retired husband volunteered to tutor teenagers at the high school where his wife continued to teach English.

"It gave them a sense of commonality," Eisen said. "They could share insights, stories and ideas about the kids they were both working with. It was very gratifying for them."

Another separation strategy is to re-arrange furniture, buy a new desk or undergo some minor home remodeling to insure that each person has a private workplace or area to be alone, concentrate or enjoy some quiet activity.

"It doesn't have to be an expensive proposition," she said. "It can be as simple as moving a television or stereo to another location."

To travel or not?

Other retired couples find themselves in different predicaments, such as learning they have opposite interests.

"One couple I interviewed both loved to travel, but they had very different approaches. He liked primitive camping while she preferred cruise ships," Eisen said.

Sometimes husbands will urge their wives to "drop what they're doing" to go somewhere and do something, while the wives don't understand why "it" can't be done later or planned in advance.

"These are the kinds of conflicts that we can discuss in the seminar and get everybody working on," Eisen said. "I regard all the participants as resource people. Sometimes ideas or advice is more palatable when you hear it from your peers."

Getting to know you

Another difficulty that may arise after retirement is becoming aware of characteristics or personality traits in a spouse



GAIL EISEN

that hadn't been apparent or upsetting until retirement brought people in closer contact.

"These emerging personality differences sometimes surprise people, and sometimes it becomes terribly grating," Eisen said. "One woman told me she was never aware how negative her husband was. She wasn't hostile. Just disappointed."

Couples cope with changes

The purpose of the seminar is to encourage people to give advance thought to some of these issues in order to make the retirement transition go more smoothly.

"Some retirees have trouble coming off the high level of involvement and activity of the workplace," she said, "while others tell me they resent the pressure to keep busy. They really do want to rest — and just be — before undertaking any kind of new routine or schedule."

Pre-retirement seminars

Eisen is experienced with all levels of the work force, having conducted pre-retirement seminars for companies such as Hughes Aircraft and Ford Motor Company, as well as universities, mental health agencies and the United Auto Workers union. She recently presented a pre-retirement seminar to employees of the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C., consisting of both management and support staff from various Latin American countries.

She wishes the business world would make these programs more prevalent, and make spousal attendance mandatory.

"It's not fair for just one partner to go away with all the information," she said.

Her UCLA seminar (\$80 or \$60 for seniors) features an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from other fields such as sociology and literature. A resource table includes "take home" materials for reading, community assistance and support network opportunities.

"Pre-retirees need to ask themselves a number of questions," Eisen said, "such as, How will my marriage change? What problems do my spouse and I have that might be (made worse) by retirement? Should we re-locate? How do I redefine myself? How will I spend my days?"

The seminar provides a safe environment for people to become candid and honest about their fears and anxieties regarding retirement.

"Many times, before the session is over, the participants ask if I'll circulate a roster so people can stay in touch with each other."

For information about the January pre-retirement seminar contact UCLA Extension at (310) 825-2301.

A segment on financial planning by a Certified Financial Planner from the Nielsen Financial Group is included as part of the two-day activity.

For retirees and spouses who are having difficulty adjusting to their new lifestyle, the following Los Angeles area organizations offer help: The Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center in Venice, the Freda Mohr Multiservice Senior Center in Los Angeles (a facility of Jewish Family Service) and the Airport Marina Counseling Service in Westchester.