9.18: Generativity in Late Adulthood

Research suggests that generativity is not just a concern for midlife adults, but for many elders, concerns about future generations continue into late adulthood. As previously discussed, some older adults are continuing to work beyond age 65. Additionally, they are volunteering in their community, and raising their grandchildren in greater numbers.

Volunteering

Many older adults spend time volunteering. Hooyman and Kiyak (2011) found that religious organizations are the primary settings for encouraging and providing opportunities to volunteer. Hospitals and environmental groups also provide volunteer opportunities for older adults. While volunteering peaks in middle adulthood, it continues to remain high among adults in their 60s, with about 40% engaging in volunteerism (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). While the number of older adults volunteering their time does decline with age, the number of hours older adults volunteer does not show much decline until they are in their late 70s (Hendricks & Cutler, 2004). African-American older adults volunteer at higher levels than other ethnic groups (Taylor, Chatters, & Leving, 2004). Taylor and colleagues attribute this to the higher involvement in religious organizations by older African-Americans.
Volunteering aids older adults as much as it does the community at large. Older adults who volunteer experience more social contact, which has been linked to higher rates of life satisfaction, and lower rates of depression and anxiety (Pilkington, Windsor, & Crisp, 2012).

Longitudinal research also finds a strong link between health in later adulthood and volunteering (Kahana, Bhatta, Lovegreen, Kahana, & Midlarsky, 2013). Lee and colleagues found that even among the oldest-old, the death rate of those who volunteer is half that of non-volunteers (Lee, Steinman, & Tan, 2011). However, older adults who volunteer may already be healthier, which is why they can volunteer compared to their less healthy age mates.

New opportunities exist for older adults to serve as virtual volunteers by dialoguing online with others from around the world and sharing their support, interests, and expertise. These volunteer opportunities range from helping teens with their writing to communicating with 'neighbors' in villages of developing countries. Virtual volunteering is available to those who cannot engage in face-to-face interactions, and it opens-up a new world of possibilities and ways to connect, maintain identity, and be productive.

### Grandparents raising Grandchildren

According to the 2014 American Community Survey (U.S. Census, 2014a), over 5.5 million children under the age of 18 were living in families headed by a grandparent. This was more than a half a million increase from 2010. While most grandparents raising grandchildren are between the ages of 55 and 64, approximately 25% of grandparents raising their grandchildren are 65 and older (Office on Women’s Health, 2010a).
For many grandparents, parenting a second time can be harder. Older adults have far less energy, and often the reason why they are now acting as parents to their grandchildren is because traumatic events. A survey by AARP (Goyer, 2010) found that grandparents were raising their grandchildren because the parents had problems with drugs and alcohol, had a mental illness, were incarcerated, had divorced, had a chronic illness, were homeless, had neglected or abused the child, were deployed in the military, or had died. While most grandparents state they gain great joy from raising their grandchildren, they also face greater financial, health, education, and housing challenges that often derail their retirement plans than do grandparents who do not have primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren.