

**MAKE THEIR DAYS**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Enid Portnoy**, Associate Professor of Communication Studies and a Faculty Associate of the Center of Aging at West Virginia University, holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Speech communication, a Master of Arts degree in Oral Interpretation from Northwestern University, and a Doctor of Education degree in Curriculum & Instruction from West Virginia University. She is a certified AARP Reminiscence Trainer and conducts many workshops on the topic. She has taught elderhostel programs, in-service training for health providers, and special courses for lifelong learners. Her intergenerational organization, INTERGENERATE, was a recipient of a Governor's Service Award as an exemplary volunteer service organization contributing to community living in West Virginia. Dr. Portnoy's articles have appeared in both communication and aging journals. She is co-author of *Phonetically Speaking* and *Nonverbal Communication* instructional workbooks and has a chapter on "Reminiscence as Communication" in *Aging and Mental Health*, published by the Mid-America Congress on Aging. Her chapter on "The Older Woman" appears in *Cross Cultural Communication and Aging*, published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. She is also a member of the Eastern Communication Association and The Association for Gerontology in Higher Education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Communication is an activity most of us engage in every day without much conscious deliberation. It fulfills one of our most significant needs: to express ourselves in response to others. Communication is a circular process of looking, listening, interpreting and then responding. During social interactions we share both verbal and nonverbal cues.

Depending upon our personality, we may become more aware of and more comfortable with one type of communication channel (eye contact, voice sounds, facial expressiveness, etc.) over others. This, then, becomes our preferred way of creating and responding to messages. As an example, if you are more sensitive to visual stimuli, you are likely to retain “eye pictures” longer in your memory, and may find yourself repeating such things as “I see what you mean,” or “I get the picture,” or “Can you visualize that?” You begin to feel more satisfied if people convey messages to you using your preferred communication channel.

This book is all about communication. It provides basic insights into the various forms of the world’s most common interpersonal activity, but it is much more: it also offers a wealth of specific suggestions for activities that can be used in one-on-one or group communication settings as in residential facilities for the elderly. However, activities can be adjusted for use in other settings and with other population groups. For example, intergenerational activities can be used to introduce members within a church or school or for social gatherings where people come together for effective conversations. The goal of such activities is to initiate,

increase, and enhance communication and to have fun doing it!

For many tomorrows, the number of older people will be more prominent in our lives. The frail elderly will continue to move into and through our institutional care systems. They will surely make greater demands on resources, energy, and staff creativity; while their basic need for a responsive communication partner will remain strong. We would all benefit by prominently displaying on our wall this statement by Malcolm Cowley (1980) from his book, *The View From 80*:

*To enter the country of old age is a new experience, different from what you supposed it to be. Nobody, man or woman, knows the country until he has lived in it and has taken out his citizenship papers.*

## **PERSONAL IDENTITY**

In many long-term care facilities, there is insufficient interest to separate the personal “seed” stories that help create an older person's identity. Time, like the school-room’s chalk, has left its mark on all of us. However, institutional living sometimes becomes a struggle for many older residents to keep their personal identity from slipping away. One way to get to know an older person is through responsive communication and recall of their past through reminiscence activity. Chapter IX provides an in-depth perspective on the very important topic of reminiscence.

Although all memories are not positive, the older person usually welcomes recall of the past. Listeners during the communication process should not prevent an exchange of negative as well as positive experiences. All are valuable in getting to know the older individual. Just as parents and teachers were early role models, later, in facilities established for the elderly, others now act as communication models and conversation partners.

Each person's life has been compared to a daisy. What is seen outwardly (when people take the time to look) is a spoke of white petals representing the visible manifestation of the person's lifestyle and behavior. Each petal is connected to a center cluster of minute, golden seed-heads representing individual experiences. Each seed-head is distinctive, yet together represent one central image. It takes time to uncover the middle cluster, and still more time to understand how each seed-head represents an important part of the person's life experience.

The President of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education has written, "One grows old with a history—a history of interactions across the generations . . ." (Ansello, 1991). Therefore, a videotaped record of a resident or potential resident can be encouraged. The film might include the person speaking and functioning in the home environment, and a chronological display of the past as reflected through family photographs and artifacts. Once in the long-term facility, videotape equipment could be made available to volunteers to use as a current record of the older individual and their adjustment for family members.

To assist an activity director to accomplish goals, the family, program leaders, staff and volunteers can be drawn into planning. Chapter V will explore ideas to enlarge activity support and involvement. It is said that the difference between an optimist and a pessimist is that an optimist goes to the window each morning and says, "Good Morning, God!" and the pessimist goes to the window and says, "Good God, Morning!" As people who work with the elderly, we can continue to work to find the lighter side of situations in order to brighten the lives of older people. The best way to share your activity involvement is through communication.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**T**his book was inspired by some wonderful older people who believe in the value of communication as a creative outlet in old age. To keep them and all of us involved, I encourage you to try the activities and interaction exercises included. Involvement with others strengthens our commitment to one another at any age.

My thanks to Glenda Bixler for her assistance and encouragement.

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