Being Empathetic to the Emotional Transitions of Aging

Many of our volunteers say that they have a hard time understanding what the Seniors at their Volunteer Placement are thinking or going through. Being knowledgeable of the life changes that they may be experiencing can help you to be more empathetic to their situation. The graphic below shows three common transitions that professionals have noted many face as they age.

**Retirement** is often the first big transition in the life of Seniors. It can be an especially difficult change, as it signals the end of their role as a provider or income earner. It also means that they must reevaluate their purpose and find another activity to fill the free time in their day to day life. Finally, it can signal a loss of independence, as they may no longer be self-sufficient on their own income.

Experiencing **loneliness and loss** is something that people go through in all stages of life, but becomes especially powerful as you get older and friends and loved ones pass away. Lifelong companions are impossible to replace and many find it difficult to form new relationships after losing someone close to them. Additionally, many of the Seniors at the Partner Programs are there because they have been abandoned by their families and communities. This leads to feeling alone and unloved.

The **relocation** to another home is another transition with which residents at Elderly Centers must come to terms. This can be extremely traumatic, as it can often mean leaving their neighborhood or community, friends, and old way of life. At an Elderly Home they will lose privacy, freedom, and independence. They will also need to re-socilize with other residents, which can be difficult. Many tend to view their new home as “temporary,” but to have a healthy transition, residents need to feel connected and have a sense of belonging to their surroundings.

These factors all underscore two big fears in many as they grow older: **uncertainty** about what the future will bring, and the increase in **dependency** on others. These two often perpetuate each other. For example, as anxiety over uncertainties about health increase, a resident loses a certain amount of independence because they need to rely on a doctor. This feels like a loss of control, when one feels like they are not in control, the future is never certain.

Many volunteers find it helpful to know that the uncertainty about the future and fear of dependence, that many Seniors face are the same fears that people of all ages have. This realization can lead to a better understanding of the people with whom you are working.