

# AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

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## Interview: Men Reveal Surprising Intimacy

*Viagra hit the North American markets in 1998, sparking a buying spree. Since then, sexual health has been narrowly defined by the ability to have intercourse.*

*But, according to a recent study, men understand their sexual lives in new ways as they age. Sexuality is more about touch, closeness and other forms of intimacy.*

*Just Feeling a Naked Body Close to You: Men, Sexuality and Intimacy in Later Life* illuminates how older men perceive their sexuality. Linn Sandberg from the University of Stockholm is author of the study, which appeared in the journal *Sexualities* (Vol. 16, No. 3/4, 2013).

*AHB reached Dr. Sandberg in Stockholm, Sweden.*

### **Ruth Dempsey: Why did you want to study sexuality in later life?**

**Linn Sandberg:** Sexuality today is understood as part of positive aging. This shift challenges persistent ideas of old age as a time of asexuality. I wanted to learn how older people themselves perceive their sexuality.

### **RD: Why focus on older men?**

**LS:** Masculinity is often associated with sexual assertion and potency. And later life is often associated with a decline in sexual function. I wanted to understand how older men themselves experience sexuality while aging: Is impotence and change in erectile function always a problem?

### **RD: Can you give me a brief description of the men in your study?**

**LS:** The qualitative study involved 22 participants. All were heterosexual white men of Swedish background. They were born between 1922 and 1942, and they were between 67 and 87 years of age at the time of the study. They came from middle and working class backgrounds. Most lived with a female partner although some men were divorced, single or widowed.

### **RD: So what did the study find?**

**LS:** Several of my interviewees expressed concerns about declining sexual function. At the same time, intimacy emerged as a central theme. Men showed a surprising ability to focus on sexual practices other than penile-vaginal intercourse.

I was struck by how men repeatedly used words like "closeness," "warmth" and "touch" to describe what makes sex in later life meaningful.

**RD: Can you give me an example?**

**LS:** One man described how he and his wife slept in separate beds and how before they got up in the morning, he always crawled into her bed to feel the warmth of her body and scratch her back to connect with her.

Another 84-year-old said being sexual with his wife meant engaging in mutual masturbation, holding each other, hugging and kissing. "I value those things just as much today as the regular intercourse in youth," he said.

In several studies, some older men and women de-emphasize the importance of intercourse, but rather stress cuddling, touch and other forms of closeness.

**RD: So, as their bodies aged, the men came to understand themselves in new ways?**

**LS:** Yes. Men noted how sexuality earlier in life, during adolescence and midlife centered on having intercourse. In later life, they experienced sexuality in terms of touch and sensuality. This made them feel freer, happier and more alive.

As one 69-year-old man remarked, "It's more carefree now compared to when you were younger." Intimacy could be something sexual, it could involve fondling and lead to orgasms. It may also involve holding someone's hand or giving a compliment.

In my study, sexuality in the lives of older men comes across as more free but also more considerate and unselfish.

**RD: But today, aging men are expected to remain "forever functional."**

**LS:** That's right. Today, maintaining sexual activity is considered a way for men to retain their masculinity and postpone aging.

The emphasis on older men's sexual function is to a large extent spurred by financial interest. Barbara Marshall and Stephen Katz from Trent University (Peterborough, Ont., Canada) have argued that while erectile changes were previously understood as signs of natural aging, they have now been renamed and transformed into a pathology: erectile dysfunction, spawning a billion-dollar industry.

**RD: Also today, an active sex life is linked to healthy aging. What about those who choose not be sexually active?**

**LS:** This is an important issue. The increasing focus on sexuality, as part of healthy aging, puts pressure on older people to maintain an active sex life. As a result, those who are unable or uninterested, may feel marginalized. The assumption here is that aging looks one way. We need to honour the many ways in which people age.

**RD: Some say health professionals ignore older people's sexual health due to their age. What is the situation in Sweden?**

**LS:** Well, the idea of Sweden as being a "sex-crazed" country is surely exaggerated. It is true that we have had sex education in schools for a very long time. Sex education became compulsory in Swedish primary schools in 1955, but I doubt sex is the first thing on the agenda for a lot of GPs when meeting seniors.

**RD: Finally, what do you take away from your study?**

**LS:** We need to listen to older people's complex experiences of sexuality. For men, sex in later life is not merely about "use it or lose it". It's about finding new and different ways of being sexual.

Just recently, Swedish media carried an item about younger and middle-age men taking Viagra as a way to secure hard penises every time. When older men in my study speak about sexuality, it is not all about "staying hard" but rather about *getting intimate*.

### **Study: Older Role Models Inspire Healthy Aging**

The secret to successful aging may be to have inspiring older adults in your life, a new study finds.

The researchers asked 151 individuals living in New York City if they had a role model of successful aging. The study found that there was no shortage of role models.

Eight-five per cent of participants, aged 18 to 99, had at least one role model. Most were family members, including parents and grandparents.

The new research suggests that having parents and grandparents as aging role models deflects harmful stereotypes and leads to greater optimism about one's own aging.

The study entitled *Who Is Your Aging Role Model?* appeared online in the *Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* (Vol. 72, No. 2, 2017).

#### **Role models**

In face-to-face interviews, researchers asked each participant, "When you think about successful aging, do you have a certain person in mind?"

The study showed that people of all ages have successful aging role models. In fact, 129 of 151 participants mentioned at least one role model.

Not surprisingly, participants preferred role models they knew personally and of their own gender.

For example, one quarter of the participants chose parents and grandparents, followed by other relatives and non-family acquaintances.

For young people, grandparents topped the list of role models. Other relatives mentioned included aunts or siblings.

About 15 per cent of participants chose friends and mentors as role models. A smaller number chose movie stars, such as Clint Eastwood and Susan Sarandon. A few mentioned politicians, such as Barak Obama and musicians such as Tina Turner and Benny Goodman.

### Characteristics

Researchers also asked study participants to give reasons for their choice of role model.

The reasons varied, with good health topping the list, followed by active lifestyle and rich social networks.

Other reasons included:

- positive attitude
- sense of humour
- independence, and
- good coping skills.

Seventeen per cent of participants said their role model embraced age and was not afraid of death.

### Impact on aging

Scientists have discovered how we *feel* about getting old matters. Specifically, stereotypes about aging can have important effects on older adults' physical and mental well-being.

For example, a University of Toronto study published in *Psychology and Aging* (Dec. 2015) showed negative feelings about aging can affect hearing and memory in older people. The lead author of the study Alison Chasteen told the *Toronto Star*, "The worse your view of aging, the worse you tend to feel about your own abilities and the worse you perform."

In this current study, researchers say encouraging individuals to choose successful aging role models may be an important step in developing a blueprint for one's own aging. It also may be a way to offset harmful stereotypes.

### **Guest Column: Celebrating Humour in a 40-Year Marriage**

*Tracy Morey, former CBC radio producer and resident of Ottawa (Ont., Canada), shares how laughter plays a role in her long marriage.*

My husband says our marital union has endured because of "laughs and lethargy." Maybe we were lethargic because we spent all our time trying to be funny, and Philip is the best at it.

The jokes are getting harsher in elderhood, but I still like the spirit.

"Trace I want you, I need you, I love you . . . I just don't want to have to do anything about it."

"You know, you really are a trophy wife . . . or is that atrophy?"

#### **Playing it positive**

The good lines started in the early 70s, when we were dating. Since it wasn't much of a topic then, I asked Philip how he felt about homosexuality. "Well," he pontificated, "I believe in polymorphous sexuality. People should make love to the trees if they want to."

Another factor linked us. I was a fervent nationalist and he was the only Canadian I'd ever met who knitted a rope hammock with hockey sticks.

When I met him, he drove a red pick-up truck (I think it was a small town thing). Then we got married and started a family. He put it this way: "My life has changed a lot in the last few years. I sold my truck . . . got married . . . had a baby . . . and boy, do I miss that truck."

A determinedly positive attitude supports most of his wit (at his retirement party, one colleague said: "I never heard him say a negative thing about anybody.") Philip's take on road rage is to say: "That guy who just cut us off? He got a call from the hospital. His mother's in emergency and he's got to get there right away."

#### **Parental spoofs**

Our children called us "hippie parents." One of their father's just for laughs illustrations of this was: "There are three rules in this house. First, no wet towels on the bathroom floor, second, no dancing on the dining room table, and . . . I forget the third rule."

Rather than chastising our children, he dealt with their dangerous behaviour by saying things like: "You know there's a whole wing at the Civic Hospital for kids who skateboard backwards." Later, it became a whole wing at the Civic for kids who dabbled in street drugs. On that issue, Philip's advice was: "You know there's a little pharmacist in your head . . . he'll take care of your needs if you let him."

His advice to new parents: "Look, the child is 80 per cent made when he or she is born. You've only got a 20 per cent window of opportunity, so don't sweat too much."

Philip's children liked lines like, "If you're ever blue and down in the dumps . . . pick me up a fender for a Ford." He also wanted to write a self-help book called "Less Misérables." His advice to the guys about oil fracking: "It'll bit u men."

### **Grand finale**

Questionable humour is in the category of "anything for a laugh." That would include the following, an obituary that Philip has written for me. Poor taste maybe, but I like it!

"Tracy Morey died at home with her family after a courageous battle with dessert."

Editor's note: *This column first appeared in the May/June 2015 issue of AHB.*

### **Study: How Older Parishioners Cope With Church Closures**

As church congregations decline and churches close, what is the impact on the well-being of older adults?

Researchers put that question to members of three Anglican parishes in eastern Canada, facing the threat of church amalgamation due to spiraling costs.

The impact of closing churches may be less than expected.

The new research found that issues of faith and community have greater impact on the well-being of older parishioners than do changing parish structures.

Lauren Trueman and Odette Gould from Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada, reported their findings in the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* (Vol. 29, No. 1, 2017).

### **Study themes**

To understand how older parishioners were coping with changes underway in their church communities, the researchers conducted three focus groups and interviewed 39 participants sampled from the three parishes.

Parishioners had been members of their current church community for between one and 55 years. The average length of membership was 17 years.

Three main themes emerged from the study:

- crisis
- transition, and
- status quo.

### **Crisis**

Supporting the closings, most parishioners believed that the only realistic outcome was the amalgamation of the three parishes into one church.

"I don't think any of our churches can go five more years down the road," one participant said. Another added, "If we do nothing, we're going to go under anyway."

Many felt frustrated that it was taking so much time to come to a decision. As one parishioner remarked, "Really we should have made this decision four years ago, we shouldn't even be sitting here having this discussion today."

Some individuals felt it was up to the bishop and priest to provide leadership and make the decisions, but others believed changes had to be driven by the grassroots.

In fact, the clergy have no clearly defined role when comes to church closings. As they saw it, they would be unable to please everyone no matter how they chose to act.

### **Transition**

Many parishioners viewed the current crisis as an opportunity to take a fresh look at Anglicanism's core values. They also saw it as a chance to find ways for the church to refocus its efforts to meet today's needs.

For example, participants talked about how the young people in their own families saw the church as irrelevant.

In addition, they noted fundraising focused on raising money to maintain the church, but little effort was invested in reaching out to the broader community.

The participants believed community renewal was necessary to attract new members, no matter what decision was made regarding amalgamation.

More practically, parishioners suggested linens, banners and stained glass windows from the closed churches be integrated into the newly shared building, as a way to make the shift to an amalgamated church less distressing.

### **Status quo**

Parishioners emphasized that changes in church structures would not change how they worshipped God or whether they went to church. Rather, these issues were rooted in their faith and commitment to the church community.

Many highlighted the emotional support fellow parishioners provided during difficult periods. As one participant put it, "If times are tough, if you are having some problems, whether it be physical, mental, you have something to fall back on. You have a church family you can go to here."

Several said their faith provided direction and meaning in life. "I think it helps you to make certain decisions that you might make differently if you didn't have some sort of belief or you didn't have a church family to help out," one participant said.

Others claimed church activities, whether cleaning or organizing events, gave their life a sense of purpose.

### **Impact on well-being**

The study concluded that these older adults viewed the current challenges as a transition rather than a crisis. In other words, the parishioners believed trust in God and the comfort of a supportive community would sustain them, regardless of the decisions taken in the current situation.

## **Roundup**

**FINDING HELP ON A PARK BENCH:** Speaking about mental health is frowned upon in Zimbabwe, as in many other places. Add to that, there's a shortage of professional help. Only 10 psychiatrists and 15 clinical psychologists serve more than 15 million people in this African country.

So, how can they help people with everyday problems in a nation where employment is rampant and more than 70 per cent of people live below the poverty line?

Dr. Dixon Chibanda, a psychiatrist at the University of Zimbabwe, came up with the idea of [The Friendship Bench](#). This is literally a simple wooden park bench located on the grounds of medical clinics around Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe.

Community members, many of them grandmothers, are trained to listen and support individuals struggling with mental stress and anxiety. According to a recent study, mostly

women visit the bench. Some are HIV positive and many have experienced domestic violence and physical illness.

Maria Makoni, a 49-year-old unemployed mother of three, began therapy earlier this year. She told the *Guardian*, "I was desperate to find someone to talk to about my problems. When I speak to them, I feel like a load is lifted off my heart."

To date, the Friendship Bench project has changed the lives of an estimated 27,000 Zimbabweans.

Several of the women have started to meet regularly to share experiences and create large, colourful shoulder bags, known as "zee" bags. They use their earnings to buy food for their families and cover other expenses.

With funding from the Canadian government, the project has been scaled up to cover 70 clinics in the cities of Harare, Gweru and Chitungwiza.

**SHARING TO CELEBRATE CANADA:** In 2017, as Canada turns 150, people old and young are sharing their stories and creating projects in communities from coast to coast to coast.

Alliance 150 is the national hub for projects and events to mark Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation. Check the action out [here](#).

**GREEN AGING:** There may be a climate skeptic in the White House, but that hasn't dented the resolve of older Americans to create a green legacy for the future.

[Gray is Green](#), the National Senior Conservation Corp is an educational group that fosters green living and advocates for sound public policy.

Harry Moody, Board President of the Gray is Green organization, urges older adults to use their voting power and other resources to tackle our warming world.

Writing in *The Public Policy & Aging Report* (Vol. 27, No.1, 2017), Moody talks poignantly about his one-year-old granddaughter: "By the year 2088, when my granddaughter has reached my age, I will no longer be here. But the results of acts of omissions of my generation will still be here."

He concludes his article with words from the Talmud:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief . . .  
You are not obligated to complete the work, but  
neither are you free to abandon it.

Meanwhile, the transition to 100 per cent clean, renewable energy is gaining momentum across the globe. In the United States, scientist Mark Jacobson from Stanford University

has teamed up with business and cultural leaders to create clean-energy road maps for communities around the world through [The Solutions Project](#).

**ONDAATJE ON DEATH:** Near the end of his novel *The English Patient*, acclaimed author Michael Ondaatje captures something of how death defines us:

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all of this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography.