Chapter Eight:

Productive Aging: Leisure, Spirituality, and Civic Engagement

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Defining Productive Aging

- **Productive Aging**: There is a much broader definition of productive aging—one that goes beyond economic terms—now includes paid and unpaid activity that produces benefits for society, e.g., caregiving, volunteerism, and contributing informally to family, friends, neighbors, and the community.
Leisure

- **Leisure** is any non-work activity characterized by the absence of obligation or what one “should” do; not *having* to do a leisure activity is what makes it inherently satisfying.

- Can leisure replace employment roles and provide satisfaction and meaningful engagement? There are different theories and arguments on this point.

- Leisure activities can have multiple benefits:
  - Building social support systems
  - Creating new sources of personal meaning and being valued
  - Enhancing a positive identity, self-concept, and life satisfaction
Religious Participation, Religiosity, and Spirituality

- Of the various options for interactions with others, a religious institution is the most common choice for older people and offers both tangible and emotional support for them.

- **Religion** refers to an organized formal system of spiritual belief, values, rituals, and practices.

- **Religiosity** is a broader concept than religion. It assumes belief in a divine being, faith in a higher power, and it typically involves prayer. Additionally, it embraces values of hope, gratitude, and forgiveness.

- **Spirituality** is believing in one’s relationship with a higher power without being religious in the sense of organized religion.
Religious Participation, Religiosity, and Spirituality

- Among the current cohort of older adults, the meaning and importance of religion tend to be stronger in old age than in earlier phases of life.

- Belonging to religiously affiliated groups and participating in religious activities offer a loving, supportive community.

- Older women have higher rates of involvement in formal religious organizations than men.

- Organized religion appears to be especially vital to the well-being of older Latinos and African Americans, enhancing their sense of meaning, life satisfaction, self-worth, and community involvement.
Religious Participation, Religiosity, and Spirituality: Religiosity

- Religiosity appears to be relatively stable from the late teens until age 60 and to increase thereafter.

- Benefits of religious participation and religiosity for older adults:
  - Longer life expectancy
  - Later onset of disability
  - For those with disability, increased likelihood of improving physical functioning and better health outcomes
  - Better cognitive functioning
  - Improved immunity to disease
  - Lower blood pressure
  - Enhanced quality of life
  - A variety of benefits for mental well-being
Religious Participation, Religiosity, and Spirituality: Religiosity

- Religion has beneficial effects on health precisely because there are so many different pathways to well-being. They include:
  - Changes in health behaviors that reduce risk factors for poor health
  - A sense of belonging and social support derived from religious participation
  - A sense of control over unhealthy behaviors and belief systems for coping with adverse circumstances
  - Regular opportunities for interaction and informal support from church members as well as more formal support from religious leaders
  - The use of religiously based coping strategies when confronted with stressful life situations
  - Opportunities to care for and serve others in need, especially among women who volunteer within religious settings
Religious Participation, Religiosity, and Spirituality: Spiritual Well-Being

• **Spirituality** emphasizes an individual's subjective experience, while religiosity refers to a person’s experience within the context of religion. Spirituality provides an interpretive framework for us to make sense of the world—who we are and how we should live.
Religious Participation, Religiosity, and Spirituality

- Implications for healthcare providers:
  - There is increasing acceptance that healthcare providers should introduce questions of religion or spirituality—and be respectful of cultural and religious differences—when they treat an older adult with chronic illness or who is dying.

- Stages of spiritual growth
  - For many older adults and their families, religiosity and spirituality are a central component of active aging, and may involve giving back to others.
Civic Engagement: Toward What End?

- **Civic Engagement** is a process in which people actively participate in the life of their communities through individual and collective activities associated with civic life, such as voting, being a political activist, joining community groups, and volunteering.
- Conservatives frequently favor volunteerism as a way to address social problems rather than turning to governmental solutions. Progressives advocate for elders to be politically active and to promote social justice to ensure that public policies, such as Social Security, safeguard the rights of vulnerable elders.
- Others argue that the concept of civic engagement itself may overlook less visible ways of attaining meaning and fulfillment in later life.
- Regardless, our society needs to create purposeful roles for elders.
Civic Engagement: Membership in Voluntary Associations

- Voluntary association membership is presumed to be a “good” leisure activity.

- **Patterns of membership:** Overall, older people tend to be more involved in voluntary organizations than younger adults. Membership, however, is tied most closely to social class, not age, and varies among cultures.
Volunteering is defined as choosing to serve or help others and can be formal or informal.

About 25% of all adults age 65 and older volunteer.

When volunteering is redefined to include informal contributions, an additional 50% volunteer informally.

Volunteerism rates climb slightly among those 65-74.

Women and professionals in the age range of 55-64 express the most interest in volunteering.

Socio-emotional selectivity is the process whereby older adults tend to be more selective about how—and with whom—they spend their time.
Civic Engagement: Volunteering

- Benefits of volunteerism:
  - Greater life satisfaction
  - Positive self-efficacy
  - Lower rates of depression
  - Higher levels of cognitive functioning
  - Better physical well-being
  - Improved social well-being
Civic Engagement: Volunteering

- Race, social class, and volunteering
  - When informal volunteering is included in definitions, African American elders report slightly more hours of volunteering than whites.
  - The Latino community has the lowest rates of formal volunteering, but informal volunteering is rooted in Latino culture.
  - Mutual aid is frequent in American Indian communities.
  - Volunteer activities among Asian and Pacific Islander elders reinforce the continuation of their value systems.

- Experience corps is one example of a highly successful intergenerational project involving lower-income, less-educated elders of color, many of whom had mobility problems.
Another important source of social and civic engagement for older adults is lifelong learning. Since 1975, the Rhodes Scholar program has involved over 150,000 adults age 50 and older in over 8,000 programs at over 1,500 different academic institutions.

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs) are based on a financial model that requires participants to provide labor and leadership to pay for their own continuing education.
Civic Engagement: Political Participation

- Political acts range from voting to participation in a political party or political action group, to grassroots campaign work, to running for or holding elective office.
  - Do older adults become more politically conservative with age?
    - Older voters are highly heterogeneous, with voting differences greater within than between age groups.
  - Voting behavior
    - Regardless of how they vote, older Americans are more likely to go to the polls than younger adults.
Civic Engagement: Political Participation

- Are older adults a powerful political constituency?
  - There are arguments on both sides of this debate.
- AARP
  - The largest membership organization in the country
  - One reason older adults are perceived as politically powerful is the dramatic influence of AARP.
    - Sample services offered by AARP include tax preparation, peer grief and loss counseling, driver safety courses, mobile home insurance, etc.
- Other organizations:
  - Gerontological Society of America (GSA)
  - The National Council on Aging (NCOA)
  - Older Women’s League (OWL)
  - Gray Panthers
Civic Engagement: Looking toward the Future of Productive Aging

- **Third Age** denotes the stage in life that occurs after middle age but before the final stage, and is conceptualized as a time of continued involvement and growth in areas of life beyond employment and family.