Interview with an Older Adult

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This paper will explore an older adult’s beliefs, impressions, and experiences around the subject of successful aging. I interviewed Patti (name changed for reasons of confidentiality) using a set of guided questions on the topic to further understand her unique views on the topic. The interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes, and was conducted over the telephone.

Patti is an 80 year-old widowed Caucasian female who was born and raised in the United States to parents that emigrated from Eastern Europe. Patti informed me that up until three years ago, she did not have to take any medicine regularly. Three years ago she had a heart attack, after which she started to take prescription medicine. More recently she had problems with tachycardia and thyroid and was placed on more medicines. Currently she takes four prescription medications. She is active and she has a companion that she travels with. During the interview she informed me of a trip she would be taking the next day. She has family members close by, but lives alone in a single family home.

I informed Patti that the general theme for the interview was “Exploring beliefs and impressions about successful aging”. I asked Patti what her thoughts on aging are. Patti told me that for her aging was “good until I turned 80” and informs me that now she has health problems and feels like she does not have the energy she had formerly. Patti feels that aging is about “retirement, and if health is good then you will not have any problems as you age”. Patti tells me that this is what aging was like for her up until three years ago, when she had a heart attack. She tells me that she wondered “Will this shorten my life?” She said that she feels she has less energy since her heart attack. Taking medications was new for her, and she informed me it is hard to adjust to each new medication. After adjusting to the medication after her heart attack, she recently had to add more medications for tachycardia, as well as thyroid disease, which she told me was a result of other medications. She felt that each time a new medication is added, it takes a long time to adjust to the side effects and that she “can’t do as much as before”.
Patti focused a great deal on health and addressing health concerns as signs of aging. She did not choose to touch on other factors that many may consider important to successful aging, such as family, independence, or companionship. American culture is often very focused on health care and medication, so it was not surprising to me that her attitude reflects a predominate American cultural attitude and reliance on mainstream health care to cope with aging.

From my interview with Patti, it is clear to me that Patti wants to stay well-informed and educated about the medications she is taking, which is an excellent strategy to help her age successfully. In the past three years she has gone from taking no prescription medications to taking four. Knowing your medication, what they are for, the possible side effects, and how they may interact with other drugs are important, especially since older adults often take multiple prescription medications.

Patti told me that she is currently taking “a thyroid medicine, a heart medicine called Amiodarone, Coumadin, which is a blood thinner, and Prilosec for acid reflux.” She also told me about her recent experience with a racing heart. This happened when she was home alone, so she called the ambulance, and was taken to the Emergency Room. She was kept overnight and monitored. Patti says many tests were done in attempt to discover the cause of the tachycardia. The doctors were not sure what caused the tachycardia, but Patti said that looking back, she thinks it was the cold medicine she took; Sudafed. Patti seems to take responsibility and time to know her medications, and appears to have educated herself as to how her medications may interact.

Patti also informed me that she feels exercising and eating habits that are important for successful aging. Another positive strategy she uses for aging is making sure to exercise and get “fresh air”. She also has changed her diet and keeps a good body weight to keep herself healthy and address her stomach acid problems. In Patti’s case she told me she should avoid eating “rich” food. Patti also
stays active in other ways. Socializing and travel keep her active and from becoming isolated, even though she lives alone.

While Patti seems to be well-educated about her medicines and what they are for, she did mention drug interactions as a concern for her. She mentioned it takes time to adjust to each new medication, and that she feels taking the over-the-counter cold medicine Sudafed may have triggered her tachycardia, which resulted in a hospital visit. When Patti felt she was having tachycardia, she described feeling very scared and anxious. Since she was home alone she called the ambulance, afraid of what may happen if she had a heart attack alone. She also mentioned her thyroid problem may be related to the other medications she has been taking.

I would suggest that further education about medications be made available to Patti. A nurse can sit down with Patti and discuss the medications she is on and the possible interactions Patti could have between her drugs. Also, since Patti mentioned interactions and the time it took to “adjust” to each medicine, it should be determined whether the medications she is on are appropriate for an older adult and, if so, if the dose is appropriate for her. She can learn which over-the-counter medications are safe for her to take, so she can avoid experiencing unpleasant or dangerous affects.

In addition, it may be helpful for Patti to discuss ways to get help if needed. Since she lives alone and has had a heart attack in the past, worrying about getting help may increase her anxiety, putting her sympathetic nervous system into action. Creating a plan to get help easily and quickly if needed may help alleviate this anxiety.

I learned some surprising information from Patti. First, I was very surprised at how much she knew about her medication. My personal stereotype was that older adults, especially those on many medications, often did not know what they were taking, or confused their medications. Patti knew about her medicines and their purpose, medications that I am only learning about now as a nursing
student. In fact, she was much better at reporting the medications she takes them I usually am in my visits to the doctor. Patti showed me that older adults are not necessarily confused or uneducated about the purpose of his or her medications, but rather some older adults can be very well-informed and involved.

Another interesting subject that Patti discussed with me was that of doctors and nurses. She told me she feels that the nurses at the hospitals “sometimes know more than the doctors” and “nurses know how the medicines work”. She stated that she found nurses to be valuable sources of information about medication. This illustrated to me just how important it is to take time to sit down with a patient and explain medication. Nurses took the time to educate her on her medications, and she is now knowledgeable about the medications she takes. As a nurse, I can keep this interview in mind when educating patients, making sure I give them the information they receive, and do not stereotype what an older adult may or may not retain.

Patti told me that to receive emergency care for her racing heart; she had to travel far to one of two larger cities in an ambulance. Since she lives in a small isolated town, the local health care provider’s office was not available to help with this emergency situation. Each time she had a possible heart problem she had to travel far away, and was therefore was not receiving consistent care by the same staff. System-wise, it would be important to research if there are local resources for Patti that she may be unaware of, or if there is a need for a local urgent care clinic to meet the needs of the residents.

I greatly enjoyed my interview with Patti and believe I gained a lot of insight from this interview process. Patti, though she has experienced some health concerns and is on four medications, remains active. She appears to be well-educated on ways to age successfully, including acknowledging the important of exercise, a proper diet, and managing her heart, stomach, and thyroid problems through medication. At the same time, Patti may benefit from further education about medications and possible
interactions, especially with over-the-counter drugs, as well as developing a plan to contact emergency services if needed, for safety reasons and to relieve possible anxiety. Patti may benefit from exploring close-by community options, or perhaps her community could benefit from a more local source of health care. Patti gave me insight to the important of nursing education in self-care, and how much it can benefit the patient to manage their health to the highest level for him or her.