

Aging Our Way: Independent Elders, Interdependent Lives
Meika Loe; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

For three years, sociologist Meika Loe followed thirty of the oldest old (aged 85-102 years). Three quarters of the group were women, and three quarters lived alone. Some resided in their longtime multi-floor homes, others in seniors apartments, a few moved into assisted living over the course of the study.

Far from viewing older adults as passive, this ethnographic study sought to present elders as they really were – agents in their homes and in the broader communities. They were all committed to living at home in their own communities for as long as possible.

The qualitative descriptions address the delicate balance of autonomy and dependence as these elders design their living space and daily routines and then readjust as frailty increases. “Asking for help and mobilizing resources are central to making it work.”

The elders tended to continue to do what has been important all their lives, all the while accommodating changes in health and circumstances. For example, overarching themes cited include: Lillian – intimacy and romance; Juana – love of baseball, especially the Yankees; Ruth L – singing; Olga – volunteering; Eddie – community builder; Emma – caring for children; Hy—education and activism; Ann – walking; Seymour – technology.

A key lesson from the elders was that they shaped their living space – sometimes changing location, and otherwise closing off sections of the family home - making continual adjustments to the furniture and its placement for convenience and comfort, eg., making things handy or creating a cozy nest or an area to keep busy.

Other themes for daily routines include living in moderation, taking time for oneself (including solitary pleasures), and asking for help. Regarding help, the study demonstrated that elders were largely coordinating their own care – mobilizing resources as needed. For example, Johanna enlisted a granddaughter, aides and a personal shopper to meet her needs. Her attitude was that people can always say no, but it is important to ask for help. Ruth H considered herself the CEO of her large home. She and friends organized a daily phone calling network, each to check on the next; and she paid an assistant who served as housekeeper, health care aide, and enabler.

Avoiding isolation is key to aging well at home – especially for staying engaged and finding support when needed. These seniors are adept at maintaining connections, even though they experience loneliness from time to time. They connect with peers and with younger generations, they connect for leisure and to contribute. “Ruth H. walks with college students, Eddie chats with people at the gym, Julia befriends and hires a homeless woman, Seymour writes for a newsletter, Pauline bakes and shares

pies, Johanna hosts a weekly Scrabble game at her home, and Alize counsels friends by phone.”

They reach out to family and redefine family when needed. They embrace positive aspects of help from family; and they reciprocate with support and assistance (mostly socially, emotionally, and financially). They reconfigure family when family members are not around or available – they exchange mutual support with peers and connect with younger people. Mary and Bill, for instance, share with neighbours in an intergenerational neighbourhood. Glenn exchanges free accommodations for companionship and physical assistance with a refugee recruited through his church.

Alice suggests that elders insist on hugs. She says: “Hugs are good for people, especially old people...because time goes by. I remember as a thirty-something visiting old people who would hold onto my hand, and I just wanted to get away. But now I understand it. It is a need – almost involuntary.”

Overall, Meika Loe presents thirty elders as models for our own aging and interdependent lives. Individuals maintain the themes of their lives, even while creatively adapting to age-related changes. They largely succeed because they know how to offer, ask for and accept assistance – because they actively practice interdependence.