

Aging and Religious Leadership
Rev. Dr. Devorah Greenstein, Spring 2011

Our dominant cultural paradigm ignores systems of privilege and difference in our society and encourages caring professionals to understand aging-related issues only as individuals' personal problems. This basic misapprehension lessens our ability to be effective in our ministries.

After successfully completing this course, students will have a broader perspective and will be able to examine and understand aging-related issues both as individual circumstances, and as clear manifestations of the broader societal context in which these individual situations and problems are situated.

Weeks 1 and 2: Theoretical frameworks

This introductory section will introduce ageism using theoretical models, including (but not limited to): social ecological models; stages of human development; models of privilege and power; conceptual age-related issues of race/ethnicity, gender identity, class, disability; equality and inequality.

On completion of this section, students will:

- share a common vocabulary to discuss aging-related issues throughout the course
- be familiar with theoretical frameworks – those that exist, those that are missing
- be able to discuss some of the layers of meaning wrapped around some of the current and popular theories

Weeks 3 and 4: Role changes

In this section we will look at the way people's roles change as they age, including (but not limited to): elders with children who once were dependent, but who are now independent adults (and elders who did not have children, and the implications of childlessness); self-definition by profession/work role, and the implications of retirement; aspects of physical aging in a culture obsessed with youthful appearance.

On completion of this section, students will:

- be aware of the overall ways in which changes in role affect people as they age
- understand useful pastoral care strategies for congregational settings
- be able to discuss the societal layers of inequalities and cultural experiences that shape and influence individuals' changes in role

Weeks 5 and 6: Spiritual development

This section will give students an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the term "aging with grace" (however each of us personally defines the word "grace"), becoming acquainted with works of contemporary thinkers and spiritual leaders. We will juxtapose personal introspection, our work as religious professionals, and the impacts of the society in which we live.

On completion of this section, students will:

- have an understanding of individual spiritual development needs in later life
- know how to foster elders' spiritual development in a congregational setting
- be able to discuss some of the inequalities and societal challenges facing elders' spiritual development

Weeks 7 and 8: Movement from independence to dependence/interdependence

Ask most people, and they will say they want to live a long life and ultimately die quietly in their sleep, but for most people their elder years include a shift toward relying on others for some portion of their personal needs. This section will focus primarily on the systems that shape the ways in which elders' increasing personal needs are met or unmet.

On completion of this section, students will:

- have an understanding of caregivers and caregiving, policies and realities
- be able to discuss the inequalities of distribution of resources to elders
- have some knowledge about how to advocate for individual elders with personal care needs

Weeks 9 and 10: Caregivers/relationships/disabilities

Clearly, increased personal needs directly affect the lives of elderly people, but they also directly affect the lives of other members of the family. The role of caregiver is *never* simple, but without support caregiving can be personally overwhelming. As with so many situations in the United States, elders can find themselves without resources and caregivers can find themselves without support.

On completion of this section, students will:

- be aware of situations that make the most demands on caregivers (and which may be denied or hidden) with emphasis on Alzheimer's and other dementias
- know about successful congregational-based caregiver support models, and about ways to find existing community supports
- understand the inequalities of caregiver support resources in the US and be able to advocate for creating community caregiver support programs

Weeks 11 and 12: Congregational support structures

Building on the work from the last section (weeks 9 and 10), students will use their own congregational experiences and contexts as reference points to explore existing structures and think about new structures that can be created to support the needs of elders in the congregation, and their caregiving family members.

On completion of this section, students will:

- know about existing congregational programs, including ways to obtain information about programs

- have thought about their own congregation's support needs and have gathered information about one potentially useful program
- be aware of elder-related children's/youths' support needs and programs that can be designed to address them

Weeks 13 and 14: End of Life Issues

At the end of the semester, having examined so many of the factors that impact elders' lives, it is appropriate to look at end-of-life issues. Cultural perspectives, hospice care, working with families, broad policy issues as well as specific hands-on resources for professional religious leaders are some of the topics that will be covered in these final two weeks of the semester.

On completion of this section, students will:

- have an understanding of cultural perspectives that will be useful to them as they work with families
- have written and on-line resources that will be useful to them in their work as religious professionals
- complete the semester with a comprehensive understanding of aging issues from a broad range of perspectives and about a broad range of topics

