

The Elder Project

User Guide

About the Film:

Synopsis

Our older seniors – those aged 80 and over – have become the fastest-growing population segment on earth and yet their voices are rarely heard. ***The Elder Project*** provides perspectives from this group by consulting directly with the experts – the elders themselves. The National Film Board followed seven elders over a period of two years, recording their experiences as they faced potential physical and mental decline and the possibility of transitioning into more dependant living situations while trying to maintain their quality of life. While each person has different social, economic, health or cultural circumstances, all share the desire to grow older with dignity and a sense of control over their future. The elders share their views on issues that affect them: the loss of mental or physical abilities, the death of a close friend or spouse, moving closer to family members and more. Through a series of short, episodic and candid stories, we hear about their needs and desires in a personal, experiential and very revealing way. This chaptered film will provide a much-needed tool for professionals who deal with seniors in many different settings – doctors, nurses, service providers, educators and caregivers. It also offers insights for family/friend caregivers into the complex issues faced by elders.

Goal

The goal of this film is to provide audiences of professionals in health and aging-related disciplines and family members with an intimate view of older adults, beyond the limitations of age and disease, and to refute the assumption of inevitable decline and frailty in older age. The film does not try to provide facts on care for older adults but rather uses storytelling to provide the social side of the aging experience from the point of view of the elders themselves.

Structure of the film

The film is approximately two hours and ten minutes long and is divided into six stories of 20 to 35 minutes each (two of the elders were filmed together). Each elder's story is further divided into chapters of approximately five to eight minutes.

About the Guide:

This guide identifies five topic themes that are relevant to the elders' lives and includes background information on each theme. Examples from the film are then identified that link to these themes. A table of contents for the film is included at the end of the guide for easy reference. Following the themes, details are provided on how the film, the individual stories and the themes can be used.

Themes:

Numerous themes emerge throughout the film. These themes are overarching topics that are important to older adults of all situations. There is significant overlap of themes. For example, the theme of independence is present in numerous other themes such as mobility and social support. A brief description of each theme is provided as well as examples of where that theme is demonstrated in the film. For the purposes of this guide, five main themes have been identified.

❑ Theme: **Independence**

❑ Description of the theme:

- Maintaining independence is a high priority for many older adults and often staying in their own homes is key to such independence. The elders in the film repeatedly state their desire to be independent. It is important for them not to become dependent on children or to have to rely on others. While this is not always possible, the desire to stay in their own home represents the value of personal responsibility and being in control of one's own life situation. An individual's independence is related to their health, how well they are physically able to take care of themselves, their ability to get around on their own (discussed separately in another theme) and overall quality of life.

❑ Examples of the theme in the film:

- Arn: Chapter 1 – he still lives alone on the farm and is able to drive. He wants to be independent until the end; Chapter 4 – Arn does not want anyone to do anything for him; Chapter 5 – He wants to pay for things (like his dental bill) himself and not rely on others or the government.
- Clara: Chapter 2 – She does not like people doing things for her. Clara is on her own the majority of her day.
- Joanna: Chapter 1 – She has been independent all her life; Chapter 2 – She continues to be independent due to the support others provide; Chapter 3 – Joanna would be unhappy if she could not stay in her own home.
- Jack and John: Chapter 1 – They can independently wheel themselves to social events; Chapter 2 – They miss the freedom of being able to drive and go out when they want.
- Nirmala: Chapter 2 – Her independence is limited by a language barrier that prevents her from using public transit. She is dependent on others to get to temple every week but at home is quite independent and prepares meals for the whole family.
- Ruth: Chapter 1 – Ruth and her husband downsized to a more manageable condo which allowed them to remain at home when he fell ill; Chapter 2 – Since she failed the driver's test she lost her driver's licence but is still able to get where she wants to go by taking public transportation; Chapter 3 – Ruth continues to be independent as long as she's physically able but is aware that she needs to be close to her family.

❑ Theme: **Mobility, Accessibility and Environmental Fit**

❑ Description of theme:

- Mobility and accessibility are important to older adults as they may determine an individual's independence and / or isolation.
- **Mobility** refers to what a person is able to do and generally encompasses the attributes of movement, adaptability, flexibility, versatility and changeability. It usually relates to physical mobility. In a broader sense, mobility represents an individual's ability to get

around within his or her environment and may include assistive devices such as a wheelchair or walker.

- Mobility is also related to body changes due to aging. Within this health context, it is viewed as a functional ability and can be used as a measure for determining independence level and healthcare needs of the older individual. Mobility is paramount if elderly people are to maintain independence.
- **Accessibility** is what the environment provides and is understood in terms of access to services and opportunities such as access to a specialist or, more generally, access to public transportation.
- Together, mobility and accessibility represent **environmental fit** which is the degree to which the needs of a person are congruent with the ability of the environment to meet those needs. For example, an individual in a wheelchair will be able to maneuver in their living space and community if there are wide doorways, lower light switches and ramps into buildings.

■ Examples of the theme in the film:

- Arn: Chapter 1 – He exercises daily to stay active. The rural community environment fits his lifestyle and desire to continue living at home.
- Clara: Chapter 1 – She is afraid to go about alone because she got lost once. Problems with her vision and memory impede her ability to take public transit; Chapter 2 – She walks around her building using her walker to get exercise while remaining safe. Within her environment, the step onto the balcony is an impediment. Clara is unable to attend an important funeral due to a lack of a ride, so in this respect her inability to drive or take public transit impedes her independence; Chapter 3 – Another component of her environment that is not appropriate is the heavy door into her apartment.
- Jack and John: Chapter 1 – They wheel themselves to the afternoon tea; Chapter 2 – John’s mobility is limited by the absence of a physiotherapist.
- Ruth: Chapter 2 – Ruth goes from having the independence of driving to relying on public transportation, but access to public transportation is difficult and unsafe (she jaywalks across a busy street to catch the bus).
- Nirmala: Chapter 2 – She is unable to use public transit due to a language barrier so her access to this service is limited.

■ Theme: **Social Support and Family Relationships**

■ Description of the theme:

- Social support is important to an individual’s well-being regardless of their age. However, for older adults the role of family and friends is especially important as the presence of social supports may help them remain as independent as possible. Social support includes real or perceived resources provided by others that enable a person to feel cared for, valued and part of a communication network and mutual obligation. Social support can be critical for those older adults who rely on family, friends or organizations to assist them with daily activities, provide companionship and care for their well-being. Quality of life, health and well-being are affected by an individual’s social involvement.

■ Examples of the theme in the film:

- Arn: Chapter 1 – Arn has a dog as a companion and receives visits from family and friends but he does not want to live with his children; Chapter 2 – He says family is the most important thing. Neighbours form an important social network as they watch out for each other.

- Clara: Chapter 2 – She reports that she is all alone and she rarely interacts with other people although she values the weekly visits with others at the Native Centre.
- Joanna: Chapter 1 – Joanna’s daughter provides care and support and coordinates other support arrangements allowing Joanna to remain at home. Her daughter describes the role reversal as she cares for her mother.
- Jack and John: Chapter 1 – They have formed a friendship partly due to their shared environment; Chapter 2 – They go to events to meet others and to remain socially involved which adds to their quality of life; Chapter 3 – Jack and John discuss how they organized their own Christmas party to get family and friends together.
- Nirmala: Chapter 1 – She talks to her family by phone every day to remain connected to those out of town; Chapter 2 – Nirmala says friends are just as important as family as they provide a different type of social connectedness.
- Ruth: Chapter 3 – After Ruth suffers a mini stroke, her daughter comes to stay with her until she can be settled in a house near her son. In her caregiver role, Ruth’s daughter still faces some challenges but reports being closer to her mother than she has been in the past.

❑ **Theme: Health – Physical and Psychological**

❑ **Description of the theme:**

- Health status includes many domains of well-being such as physical, social and psychological and for some individuals it includes a spiritual domain. There are many factors that affect an individual’s health status.
- The physical functioning of older adults changes as they age, and the incidence of chronic conditions increases. However there is increasing societal focus on ageing well rather than on inevitable decline.
- Inadequate social support and social isolation are stressors thought to have effects on immune, metabolic and cardiovascular systems as well as on behaviour. Since the degree of social support may predict an elder’s physical and mental health, it is an important consideration for health status. Involvement in an individual’s cultural community is also associated with staying healthy, as evidenced in the case of Clara, Joanna and Nirmala.

❑ **Examples of the theme in the film:**

- Arn: Chapter 1 – He says it is important not to get sick, to exercise regularly and look after yourself; Chapter 5 – It is important to be physically healthy and to keep your mind active.
- Clara: Chapter 1 – Clara’s sore legs inhibit her activity; Chapter 2 – Her eyesight is deteriorating which her doctor associates with advancing age.
- Joanna: Chapter 1 – She reports being happy and healthy despite cognitive decline and is able to live in her own home.
- Jack and John: Chapter 1 – They stress the importance of staying mentally healthy as they have seen others with Alzheimer’s disease and the toll it takes on an individual and their loved ones.
- Nirmala: Chapter 2 – According to her son, Nirmala’s health improved when she moved to a location that supported her culture.
- Ruth: Chapter 2 – When she suffers a mini stroke, her health declines to the point where she can no longer remain in her apartment but needs to move closer to family.

❑ Theme: **Ethnicity, Language and Traditions**

❑ Description of the theme:

❑ Ethnicity is important, especially in a multicultural society such as Canada. It is a critical component of what shapes human experience throughout life. Ethnicity, language and tradition may significantly influence the experience of ageing and can to some extent determine what is considered aging well.

❑ Examples of the theme in the film:

- Clara: Chapter 1 – She makes a point of going to the Native Centre once a week even though she is dependent on others for a ride; Chapter 2 – She would like someone with whom to speak Cree in order to maintain that link with her heritage.
- Nirmala: Chapter 1 – She maintains her language with family and friends and does not speak much English at all which acts as a barrier to her ability to get around. Nirmala's tradition dictates that the oldest son will be responsible for his mother in her later years.
- Joanna: Chapter 2 – She speaks Polish with her companion and daughter.
- Ruth: Chapter 4 – In more western countries, the focus is on maintaining older parent's independence such as when Ruth's son builds her "Daffodil Cottage" which fulfills her desire and need to be close to her family and yet still independent.

Overall, the importance of quality of life is a focus of the elders portrayed in the film. All these themes mentioned are components of aging well: independence, health, social support, culture and environment. Most of the elders in the film have a very positive attitude toward ageing and take things in stride. Clara, on the other hand, expresses that there is nothing good about getting old yet she still enjoys many aspects of her life. This is another example of the diversity of experiences in later life.

Using the Film and Guide:

This guide is designed primarily to help professionals use the film in their teaching and professional work.

❑ Stories of individual elders can be used one at a time:

- Each elder's story can be used as an example of the lived experience of aging within our society; use one story that fits with the topic of a course. Be aware that using one story may not provide the full range of diversity of experiences.
- For example, one older adult from the film can be highlighted as the focus of an in-depth case study for medical students on geriatric issues.
- Since the nursing discipline centers on context-based learning, it may be appropriate to use a story that depicts the life of an older adult in complex social, mental and physical dimensions.

❑ Use of the full film:

- In their entirety, the stories in the film combine to bring a complex understanding of the challenges, needs, experiences and expectations of older adults. Use of the whole film demonstrates the complex issues related to older adulthood.
- The full film, used throughout a course term, provides the benefit of the diversity of experiences and the personal story of each individual and can be broken down by themes for ease of inclusion into course content.

■ Use of the themes:

- Using a theme as a focus, chapters from various stories can be used to demonstrate the theme with real-life examples. For instance, an environmental design course may look at the theme of mobility in Clara’s story to determine how environmental fit may be important to older adults in terms of weight of doors or height of steps.

About the Author of this Guide

This user guide was developed by Sarah Lucas, a Masters of Science in Aging student in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta. Sarah has a BA in Psychology and has several years experience working in different environments related to the needs of older adults.

Film Table of Contents:

Arn – 86 years

- Chapter 1. “Take charge of your life.”
- Chapter 2. “Without challenges you go to seed.”
- Chapter 3. “Problems, but I’m still a tough guy.”
- Chapter 4. “I don’t like winters.”
- Chapter 5. “Still a tiger.”

Joanna – 81 years

- Chapter 1. Mother and Daughter Role Reversal
- Chapter 2. Lady of the House
- Chapter 3. Problems Compiling
- Chapter 4. Home Care

Nirmala – 81 years

- Chapter 1. An Honourable Tradition
- Chapter 2. Friends and Community

Clara – 88 years

- Chapter 1. Weekly Outing to the Native Seniors’ Centre
- Chapter 2. “Me, myself alone!”
- Chapter 3. Long, Lonely Nights

Jack and John – 88 and 84

- Chapter 1. Friends
- Chapter 2. Filling the Day
- Chapter 3. Mobility and Time
- Chapter 4. Sharing Memories
- Chapter 5. Lest We Forget

Ruth – 87 years

- Chapter 1. Life Without Leo
- Chapter 2. “Lost my driver’s licence!”
- Chapter 3. Time to Pack Up and Move
- Chapter 4. Daffodil Cottage