



de Tornyay

CENTER FOR HEALTHY AGING

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The experience of homeless older adults with age-related sensory changes

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Acknowledgments

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Participants and staff at the Pike Market Senior Center
Germaine Krysan Undergraduate Scholarship
deTornyay Center for Healthy Aging
University of Washington School of Nursing



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Motivation

- 2008-2009 Healthy Aging Research Project
 - 7 older adults, most with private insurance, had no barriers to obtaining care for vision correction
 - Enjoyed open-ended interviews more than administering survey
- Experience working and volunteering with homeless populations
- Minimal existing research on homeless older adults and sensory loss



Research Purpose

- Provide better understanding of how homeless and low-income older adults
 - experience age-related sensory changes
 - manage these changes given limited resources



Pike Market Senior Center

- Drop-in center by Pike Place Market that serves adults over 55
- Provides daily breakfast and lunch
- Membership demographics
 - Over 50% are homeless
 - 85% male, 15% female
 - Ethnically and racially diverse



Methods

- Partnership with Pike Market Senior Center
- Human Subjects Certificate of Exemption
- Open-ended interview asking participants about their experience with sensory loss
- Interviews transcribed verbatim with verification of transcription
- Identification of overarching themes



Study Participants

- Sample: 6 male older adults, all homeless or low-income
- Age range: 56-65 (mean = 60.7)
- Race/ethnicity: African-American, Caucasian, East African, Hawaiian, Mexican-American



Results

- Perception of the problem
- Effects on daily life
- Adaptation strategies
- Barriers to utilizing resources

Perception of the problem

- Eyes are “distorted” and “weak” due to age
- Working construction could be a factor in hearing loss
- Aging is also a blessing, because you gain maturity
- Vision loss a minor inconvenience

“You know, I’m losing all my perceptions, you know, sensory and things because of age. I guess that’s the normal way of life. Everybody, regardless to your economic status or anything, the older you get you just revert back to childhood.” --Participant #1



Effects on daily life

- Employment
 - Can't find work
 - Hard to hear what potential employers are saying
- Relationships
 - Difficult to understand conversations
 - Friends and family make fun
 - Misinterpreting loud voices as anger
- Safety
 - Watching for cars as a pedestrian
 - Driving
 - Being seen as a target by younger people



Effects on daily life

- Leisure
 - Hard to see the score changing when watching basketball on TV
 - Can't read for pleasure

“I can't read a tape measure cause I can't see the numbers on em ... It bothers me, you know, because I can't get work like I used to get. When you're a cement finisher you have to see where your low spots are and your high spots are, and I can't see that.”

--Participant #3



Adaptation Strategies

- Acceptance
- Bargain shopping
 - Dollar store, drugstore, “homeless places”

“The only thing I can do is just accept it the way it is. I cannot do nothing about it. It’s part of my body. Hopefully, they will have something that can better my ear, someday. And if it doesn’t then I’ll just keep going. That’s all I can do.” --Participant #6



Adaptation strategies

- Changing the environment
 - Choosing places with quieter background noise
 - Using glasses or proper lighting
 - Using earplugs for loud music
- Peer support
 - Helping each other at work
 - Telling each other to get help

“If he doesn’t have it, I’ll tell him, ‘Wear glasses! What’s wrong with you?’ And he’ll say, ‘What about you?’ And I’ll say, ‘I’m wrong too, let’s wear it.’ So we’ll do it together, you know.” --Participant #5



Barriers to utilizing resources

- Losing things
 - Glasses, pieces of paper
- Lack of money / insurance
- Side effects
 - Headache, dizziness with glasses
- “I’m just lazy”



Barriers to utilizing resources

- “Rigmarole”
 - Showing up, signing up, waiting for free services
 - Medicare changes all the time

“If you don’t just have the money to plunk down and go in places, you have to wait and stuff. People make comments like, ‘Well you got all this for free,’ and stuff, but it’s not really like that, you know? I mean, you’re paying with your time and effort. It’s not just some easy handout.” --Participant #2



Conclusions

- Many similar challenges to higher-income older adults
 - Affects communication, leisure activities
- Very different context and priorities
 - Transient lifestyle
 - Free and low-cost adaptation strategies
 - Difficult to access services

Insights and Implications

- Very easy to recruit participants at the PMSC
- Participants loved telling their stories and giving advice
- Transcription takes a long time!
- Providers can help assess needs related to sensory loss
- Research considerations
 - Use peer support in designing interventions
 - Clinics that combine vision, hearing, & dental services
 - Larger sample size, more women



Thank You!

