

Gifted senior citizens: a forgotten groupⁱ

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Many articles have been written about giftedness in children. More and more people realise that they need some extra attention and in some cases a different school system. But you will have trouble finding any articles about gifted adults or senior citizens, even though there must be many thousands of them. They also need some extra attention and have special requirements to be more happy and less lonely in their lives.

Richard

Richard is now 89 years old and is a bit closed in character, but has a sharp and interested mind. He is an artist and still draws to this day. He used to live by himself with some extra care. A year ago he was hospitalised because of polyps in the intestine, unfortunately followed by a hospital infection. He got worse after that. Jannie, his daughter in law, called him exhausted and over-stressed. He showed signs of depression and was fearful. A few weeks later he wanted to end his life. He tried to do this at home, was found still alive and taken to a nursing home. Jannie was very worried about him. Life in the nursing home is very difficult for Richard. He has nobody to talk to and he hardly has room to do his drawings. Life is not worth living for him in this manner. When Jannie and her husband take him out for the day he is visibly happier. That shows that Richard doesn't particularly need care, but more perspective. From an acquaintance who is a member of Mensa (an international organisation for intelligent people) Jannie hears about a specific nursing home in Laren – the Rosa Spier Home – where artists and scientists can live to a high age while getting the care and attention they need, while continuing their work. Although the waiting list is quite long, they manage to get Richard a place in this home at first on the nursing department, later in a living room of his own. Now that he has the space to be active in his own way he quickly recovers significantly.

Experiences of gifted seniors

Many gifted older people never find out, or really late in life, that they are gifted. Understanding this way of 'being different' and 'feeling different' can help to function better and create more connections with other people. This is quite often a problem because other people are slower thinkers than they are and have completely different interests. Gifted people are bored quite quickly when they aren't challenged. At work, for example, the conversations during break time can seem quite dull and they will stay away from the group (Nauta & Ronner 2007).

In the last phase of their life many gifted seniors will withdraw from other people because there are less and less people left to talk with on the same level of perception. The normal activities that are offered to their age group, like bingo, are quite unappealing (De Weerd 2011). This often makes them more lonely than they would prefer. Even a celebrated pioneer in the field of giftedness didn't escape this trap (Roeper 2007).

For Richard, who was described above, the first nursing home was an environment where he wasted away. In his creative thinking, autonomy and quick mind he was much like a gifted person (see frame). Only when somebody recognised who he was and what he needed did he blossom again.

Recognition helps

Recognising that you are gifted is quite often an eye opener to people. This path of recognition isn't always easy; for some it feels a lot like being in mourning. However, in retrospect most people will confess to being very happy to have followed this path.

They feel that other gifted people understand them better. Conversations can often be so highly animated that they forget the time. But not all gifted people are automatically friends, there are substantial differences between them. Even in larger communities, like nursing homes, there are often only a few people that a gifted person connects with on a deeper level. Activities around a topic

of substance provide the best opportunity to meet others who have similar interests. These activities could be presentations (with a group discussion afterwards), music recitals or mind games such as scrabble, bridge, chess and mahjong.

When someone knows he or she is gifted it will make it easier to find fitting activities and people with whom a common interest is shared. The questions and characteristics in the frame below are meant to help find points of recognition. Even when not all characteristics fit someone can feel the need for more challenging and in-depth activities.

Giftedness: characteristics and questions

In many publications emphasis is mostly put on the IQ of the person being in the top 2% of the population. There is also a broader description: a gifted person is a quick and smart thinker, who is able to handle complex issues. Autonomous, curious and driven by nature. A sensitive and emotional person, living intensely. He or she enjoys creating things (Kooijman-van Thiel 2008).

Characteristics that can point in the direction of giftedness:

1. Has a broad range of interests and one or more special hobbies.
2. Is very curious and enjoys learning new things.
3. Is creative and a good associative thinker.
4. Is very attached to his/her autonomy.
5. One or more (grand)children are gifted.
6. Often feels uncomfortable in groups and doesn't enjoy going to birthdays and parties; prefers to read a book or go outside alone.
7. Has had a different time in school, for example: wanted to study at university, but wasn't allowed, or failed in school but finished a course later on in life.
8. Has had many different jobs and sometimes also conflicts at work.

Questions that many gifted seniors ask themselves:

1. I've felt different from others all my life. What is wrong with me?
2. Why can't I really relate to the other people here?
3. Why do they only organise activities here that really don't appeal to me?
4. Why do they treat me like a child here?
5. Why don't they understand so many of my questions?

*These questions and characteristics are based on the model discussed above and interviews conducted with gifted seniors.

Residential facilities for gifted people

Older people more easily find themselves isolated from others than younger people, especially when their mobility diminishes over time. Seniors belonging to a small group with special characteristics have a greater risk of becoming lonely, with all the associated consequences on a mental and physical level. That's why it is necessary to give some extra attention to this group of gifted seniors.

We prefer a practical approach that offers everybody equal opportunities, without limiting choices beforehand. For some it will be enough to know that there are other gifted seniors in their neighbourhood or village. Others may prefer to take it a step further by actually moving closer to other gifted seniors. Or even living in a community of gifted seniors where they share a building and its facilities.

A very inspiring example is the Rosa Spier Home in Laren (the Netherlands), where the aim is to offer artists and scientists a living and working environment where they can continue their work up to a high age, and contribute to cultural life, even though they need care.

None of the facilities mentioned above will be created spontaneously, some co-ordination will be necessary. A project organisation will be necessary for the far-reaching alternatives mentioned. An

important role can be given to social housing companies, care or nursing companies and project developers.

References

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[\[http://www.sengifted.org/archives/articles/growing-old-gifted\]](http://www.sengifted.org/archives/articles/growing-old-gifted)

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ⁱ This article was published in Dutch under the title 'Hoogbegaafde senioren: een vergeten groep' in *Gerõn* 14(2012) #4: 35-38. *Gerõn* is a Dutch journal for ageing and society. Translation into English: Yvonne Veltmaat.