

The Elderlaw Forum: Depression, retirement and the search for purpose

by Professor Michael Myers

Depression after retirement is common; especially among persons who invested heavily in their careers and neglected other areas of their lives.

Suddenly they feel emptiness and despair when they retire. People whose sense of self-esteem and worth is dependent on their work are particularly at risk. They may feel they have lost their purpose for living; that they are worthless and no longer have a role to play in society.

That message was delivered by Scott McNairy, a Minneapolis psychiatrist, during a guest appearance on the radio version of The Elderlaw Forum. We addressed the subject, "Depression, Addiction, and Living with Purpose." He collaborates with the University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing in the "Purpose Project," a program that "explores new ground in vital aging and retirement."

"We are born with a purpose," says Dr. McNairy. "Some of us never question our purpose and so it remains unspoken our whole lives. But it is there. Our purpose is the reason we are alive."

He says purpose is not a job, or a role. "It is a cradle-to-grave, round-the-clock unifying principle in our daily lives. It is our reason for getting up in the morning. Purpose is that deepest belief within us where we have a profound sense of who we are, where we came from and where we're going."

Life, at its root, is paradoxical. What we believe will make us happy often makes us unhappy. Labor and trials we seek to avoid surprisingly yield satisfaction and fulfillment.

Serving meals at a community soup kitchen may do more for the soul than ingesting a \$50 entrée at a five-star restaurant. Weeding a garden may be more uplifting, both physically and emotionally, than hiring someone else to perform the task. Generally, work trumps play; discipline outscores indifference, and generosity yields self-satisfaction.

Retirement is the classic paradox. Most people believe retirement will deliver an improved level of happiness. They look forward to freedom from work schedules, deadlines, disagreeable co-workers, performance appraisals and the accumulative stresses of employment.

Regrettably, a high percentage of retirees fail to build a replacement for the platform provided by their job, profession, or career. They enter a state of "functional depression."

Retired? In a state of comfortable malaise? Contact the University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing. They can help you restore purpose to your life.

(Pro bono legal information and advice is available to persons 55 and older through the USD Senior Legal Helpline, 1-800757-1895; mmyers@usd.edu. Opinions are solely those of the author and not the University of South Dakota.)

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