

Transitional Keys

Sherman, A. & Weiner, M. (2004). *Transitional Keys, A Guidebook: Rituals to Improve Quality of Life for Older Adults*. Dobb Ferry, N.Y.: Transitional Keys.

Andrea Sherman, Ph.D., gerontologist, was inspired by the work of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, Ph.D. to develop Transitional Keys as a way to instill the benefits of ritual into the care of elders. Americans, particularly elder Americans feel change as loss. American society has few socially sanctioned rituals to mark the transitions people experience as they age. The Transitional Keys technique brings ritual for elders into a variety of care giving settings and can be used by family members as well as by caregivers.

Sherman, who is project director for the Consortium of New York Geriatric Education Centers at New York University, Division of Nursing, explains that there are many socially accepted rituals for the first half of life but too few for the second half: "At a time when we could use them, we don't have them. In the first half we have pregnancy, birth, christenings, and weddings. What is there between retirement and funerals for an elder? Not much. There are so many traumatic events, and no way to acknowledge them. Yet there are so many turning points: menopause, retirement, losing a driver's license, moving into a different living situation, losing a spouse, losing friends-it's huge." The guidebook divides rituals into celebrations, turning points and loss. The program encompasses learning about ritual tools and techniques, "how you do it and what you need to do it," said Sherman. The book aims to bring elders personal acknowledgment and connection to community at times of transition and great change. It is a restorative way to meet the challenges of daily life. The book offers guidelines for using symbols and senses, such as the sound of music or the sight and touch of familiar objects, to mark rites of passage. Chapters include reminiscence and life review; rituals for moving; blessing the room of a new residence; rituals for activities of daily living; welcoming rituals; using cultural and religious beliefs and symbols; creating new rituals, such as an icebreakers ceremony in a new residential care facility; and rituals for building community.

"Ritual is a container or vessel for these experiences," Sherman says. "A ritual enables you to mark an event. It can provide order and clarity during times of anxiety and stress; it can provide healing, integration, clarity and framing of an event. It helps us understand the nature of the midlife adventure, and helps us explore the wisdom of our experiences with life transitions and transformations."

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: Recognition can take the fear out of trying situations. Rituals can bring a feeling of having greater control over one's life through bringing recognition and creating a more "normal" thus acceptable atmosphere.