

Wise Women work together as they navigate life changes

Psychologist Beth Firestein created support group to give women help to deal with aging

By **Joyce Davis** For the Reporter-Herald
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Dr. Beth Firestein, right, chats May 30 with three members of the Wise Women support group during lunch at Adelita's in Loveland. From left the ladies are Nancy Lichina, Skye Summerain and Nancy McDonald. (Liyana Haniff)

Growing older is a challenge at any age. For women in their 50s, 60s, 70s and up, the challenges may be accompanied with feelings of sadness, confusion and even dread. In many cases, each birthday may bring unexpected, life-altering changes -- empty nest, divorce, death of a mate, loss of a job or feelings of inadequacy and depression.

In the United States, the average life expectancy of women exceeds 80 years. With this in mind, women are seeking help in defining their lives and creating positive images as they move forward.

Beth Firestein, a Loveland licensed psychologist, created the Wise Women Support Group as a safe haven for women struggling with a variety of aging issues. The group, for women 50-100, is on summer hiatus, but will begin again in September. The strong bonds formed by the women create a path for wholeness and confidence in the future.

"I'm always struck by the range of responses from women going through major transitions in life," she says. "There are all levels of acceptance, adaptation and attitudes. Even the healthiest of women are affected by a sudden shift that triggers an existential crisis."

Women in the group seek a more pro-active response to aging, says Firestein, who has 27 years experience. "Many concerns throughout their lives become more pronounced as they get older and even though they've always been self-reliant, at some point they realize they can't deal with these issues by themselves."

With aging, women may find their lives altered in a variety of ways. "I notice the women in this group -- a self-selected group -- are eager to grow and heal. Regardless of their differences, they're all highly motivated to that end," she says.

Peggy Edwards, of Loveland, says women may seek permission to change their lives. "When you're with these other women, you see what they're doing with their lives and it makes you questions your own. You think 'Wow!' Can I accomplish these things, work through them? Am I good enough to do it?'"



Dr. Beth Firestein leads a Wise Women support group for women ages 55 and above in Loveland. The support group is free and the women meet every other week at a restaurant to talk about the challenges they face. (Liyana Haniff)

Wise Women Support Info

"It's time to look at age on its own terms, and put names on its values and strengths, breaking through the definition of age solely as deterioration or decline from youth. The problem is how to break through the cocoon of our illusory youth and risk a new stage in life, where there are no

prescribed roles, no models nor rigid rules or visible rewards -- how to step out into a true existential unknown for these years of life now open to us and to find our own terms for living them." -- Betty Friedan, author and feminist, in "The Fountain of Age"

Information: For a schedule of future Wise Women Support Group meetings, call Beth Firestein, Source Psychotherapy & Consultation Services, at 635-9116.

Married at 18, Edwards has been widowed twice -- the first time at age 28 with a 3-year-old son, then again at age 55. She's also a survivor of domestic violence.

"I wanted to be with other women who may or may not have been in the same situation to learn from them," she says. "There's such a stigma with domestic violence. It's hard to get out of your little world, to make yourself vulnerable. We're searching for a way to find ourselves, but we can't do it on our own. You can heal, you can become whole, but you need that nurturing support from other women."

Pat Saunders-White is transitioning through several life changes, including a divorce. "Sometimes older women are so enmeshed in traditional patterns they can't break out," she says. "It's time to reinvent yourself, strip away those old roles."

She says it's important to foster the spirit of independence. "Hopefully, there comes a time when you grow to a point where you can do anything you want, whenever you want."

Even so, some barriers remain. "As we're growing, we still carry around that little kid with all the insecurities inside of us," Saunders-White says. "If you receive a compliment, that kid is thinking you don't deserve it. We're learning to leave that voice behind, live in the present and believe in who we are now."

Firestein focuses on helping each woman build a foundation by identifying their character strengths.

"There's a lot of laughter in the group and the tone is one of resilience," she says. "Our emphasis is on moving forward with practical support to create healthy women psychologically, physically and emotionally. It's no pity party."

Emboldened, both Saunders-White and Edwards have used travel to make a statement. Last year, Edwards popped her dog in the car for a road trip to Idaho -- a time of self-enlightenment.

"I had a tendency to isolate myself," she says. "I always thought I was an introvert, but it turns out that I'm actually an extrovert. I really loved meeting people on that trip."

Saunders-White recently made a solo trip to Santa Fe. "All these years I had qualms and what-ifs about doing that," she says. "It was great to just go ahead and do it."

It's about empowerment, says Firestein. "I would say that 100 percent of the women feel the need to be valued throughout this transition. They create this tight-knit group in a unifying motivation to re-engage in an exciting, new life."

Saunders-White agrees. "We're women who are moving along together -- it's that universal camaraderie women have that keeps us going."

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