

THE ELDERLY MONAXIA AND DEPRESSION IN THE AUSTRALIAN HELLENIC COMMUNITY

The Voice from the Pavement - Peter Adamis



The elderly past and present

One must forgive a person who begins to write about a particular subject and finds that they have gone off track somewhere along the article. This author can be accused of being verbose in getting to the heart of the matter but eventually get back on track once other issues associated with the topic have also been visited.

This article is no different and apologies to the purists. It begins with the subject matter of depression amongst the Australian Hellenic communities and then veers off to the left and right of centre gathering information and data that has some semblance to the original topic. I guess it must have something to do with the author's Hellenic background and the need to express one self.

The elderly and other members of the Australian Hellenic community suffer from depression that comes in many forms and what is needed is compassion and understanding. Depression according to the experts in their fields can be cured and in others it is a difficult road to take. In the past when one was growing up as a second generation Australian Hellene, we would often hear of people dying as a result of "Monaxia" (loneliness), "stenhorigia" (worry), "arostia" (illness), "kardia" (heart), "pono" (pain), "psiholgia" (psychological).

All of these could be associated to some degree with depression. Some even took their own lives and committed suicide by hanging, drug abuse, accidents and others just wandering the streets, going from one friend's home to another. As a Hellene born in Greece and raised in Australia, tis author has experienced all of the above in one form or another, whether its amongst friends and relatives from both the Anglo/Saxon and Hellenic culture.

What "Monaxia" (loneliness), "stenhorigia" (worry), "arostia" (illness), "kardia" (heart), "pono" (pain), "psiholgia" (psychological) and depression is to one person may be a phase another person is going through at one time or another. Many try and hide the symptoms by putting on a brave face and others become hermits hiding from the world around them.

There are many Australians of Hellenic background that are living in the suburbs shut out from their normal circle of friends and cut off from their communities. It is not until they become infirm weak and fragile with life threatening symptoms that they become noticeable if at all. Many end up in aged care facilities because the children are unable or unwilling to care for their elderly parents. What a joke and turn of events.

According to one study, "traditionally the children and family members care for the elderly at home, where possible. However it is no longer customary for Greek families in Australia to live together as an extended family unit. Many elderly people live alone. – Greek elders have a high status in the family and community and are treated with respect. – Language and cultural differences may cause generational issues to arise between older Greeks and their Australian-born children and grandchildren. – Grandparents often play an important role in caring for their grandchildren.

Their attitudes to Disability and Mental Illness is interesting in that the Greek-born community regards disability as shameful and a strong cultural stigma is attached to mental illness in particular. Older Greeks may be reluctant to access mental health services, as there is a general lack of understanding of mental health issues. 'Depression' is not understood to be a mental illness. " (South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre June 2008)

The parents who raised the children in the first place, did so out of love and compassion for their young. Raising them to adult hood and supporting them to become independent. Even when they were married, parents supported their children and their grandchildren to the point of spoiling them and ensuring that the new generation remained healthy and had the opportunity to excel.

In the early fifties, sixties and seventies, it was not uncommon to have close family support and to be living within earshot so to speak, but then after the late seventies something changed and the Australian Hellenic community became widespread throughout the Australian landscape. This was not a bad thing as it enabled the young to expand and express themselves without the influence of their elders and still remains within the Australian Hellenic community.

Now that we are in the 21 century we may reflect back on the past 30 to 60 years and wonder whether we are following in the footsteps of our North American cousins, especially those residing the United States of America. Our American cousins experienced the same phenomena as what Australian Hellenes are currently experienced and came to a stage where they had almost lost their cultural identity. What have saved them were the communities that were created by their grandparents and followed up by their parents to some degree.

It was the third generation that struggled to maintain the status quo, but there were some determined individuals that were able to carry on the good work of their predecessors. In North America, the clergy play a huge part in retaining the Hellenic culture through its religious festivals and events that are associated with the Church.

The communities on the other hand who are a standalone community have survived due to the financial strength of the organisation and/or have adapted its constitutions to be more in line with their adopted country.

The church in Australia has a huge responsibility given the wide expansion of the Hellenic community spread over the Australian countryside. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia has recognised the problems associated with integration and loss of one's identity in an adopted country from their experiences in other parts of the world and takes great pains to keep its flock together. In many cases the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia has influenced many communities to amalgamate and come under the support of the church in return for spiritual and support not found elsewhere.

In other cases the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia has played a major role in the integration of communities under their banner for reasons unknown at this stage but one believes it is for the common good of all Australians of Hellenic background. However having said that, there are communities that respect the teaching and the customs of the church but prefer to remain at arm's length and not fall under the influence banner of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia banner

This now brings us back to the original topic of "Monaxia" (loneliness), "stenhorigia" (worry), "arostia" (illness), "kardia" (heart), "pono" (pain), "psiholgia" (psychological) and depression and the elderly and what are we currently doing to combat this malady or illness. For those of us who are able to support and care for our elderly and/or those who are suffering from depression, demonstrate this by having those whom we care about close to home or within a cooee distance from loved ones.

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia has built a number of aged care facilities throughout Australia to take on the burgeoning responsibility from the children and those unable to care for the elderly and those suffering from illness. Others may find reasons to criticise the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia but one must also recognise their good works in doing when others lack the motivation and initiative to take a leadership role.

Froniditha Care is another organisation that is flourishing in Melbourne Victoria. Melbourne being the place where there are more Australians from Hellenic background concentrated outside of Greece itself. Fronditha is a charitable, community based organization which provides services to Australian of Hellenic background. Starting off in 1976, Fronditha has been accepted across the broad Australian Hellenic Community and is shining light amongst many Australian Hellenic community organisations.

Notwithstanding other likeminded care organisations in the other states of Australia, Fronditha is the only organization providing a range of residential and support services to the Australian Hellenic community in Victoria. The organisation of Fronditha believes in maintaining cultural identity amongst the elderly as it assists in the long term welfare and wellbeing of its people and staff. (Froniditha October 2011)

Others who came from large families would band together and ensured that home help was available for those who were fragile, depressed and the elderly, but this was far and few in between. For many who were unable to support the elderly or those suffering from an illness such as depression were placed in a care facility that was designed to cater for the needs of their patients. This was one of many indicators of how Australians of Hellenic background had mirrored their brethren of Anglo/Saxon background.

Australians in the past admired the Australian Hellene for the manner in which they looked after their elderly and the close relationship between the generations. Now there is no difference whatsoever between the two cultures and it not uncommon to find the two cultures being side by side in the care facilities that is located throughout Australian cities and countryside.

What does this mean to all those who have Hellenic origins, probably not much. Its only when it begins to affect them and the time comes to make a decision that they are confronted with the very issues that they put on the back burner so to speak. It's no wonder that many of the elderly and those who still have the financial power wish to return to their place of origin and lie with their ancestors. This authors belief is that it is a difficult decision to make, but that whatever it may be, it must be in the interests if the elderly and those who have an illness and not in the interests of those making those decisions.

The elderly and those with an illness should be kept close to home and governmental support provided to cater for the needs of both the individual and that o the carer. This will not only release much funding, but create another industry and also reduce government spending. It would be great to appreciate those who gave us life and to cater for their needs at a time when they most need it and demonstrate that we are up to the job when we are in a far more stable position than our predecessors were when they arrived in their adopted country. One would hate to think that we will appreciate them more when they have gone. **Peter Adamis**



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