



Diverse perspectives on health and illness

Experiences of ageing

Presenter

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For this programme, we spoke to three women from different parts of the country, and with very different life histories to tell. First Mrs Newton, who's now living in a residential home.

Mrs Newton

Well I was born from a very poor family, there were seven of us, and my father went to school as a teacher in Wellington Road, Hanley. What date that was, it would be, 1901 or '02, as near as I can tell you. and there were seven of us, and my mother, I'm afraid she got into bad company, she came off a very good family in Lancashire, but she got into bad company here. So, father went to school to keep seven of us in Wellington Road Hanley, but when he brought the, his wages home in gold sovereigns, my mother was very forgetful, and she'd put them down anywhere, and many a month's money has been lost that way.

She was a, a tailoress by trade, and she couldn't take to hard work, so we employed this woman to help us. My mother drank heavily, and she used to go for nights, and leave us, while father was at night school, my mother used to go off with this char lady to Hanley, to the Hanley Grand, and she'd leave six or seven of us to play alone. She'd put the eldest girl in charge of us Mary. Mary had to mind us. When he came home, mother was missing, and an hour or two later, my mother used to come in, and her colleague used to bring her, as bad as she was, 'come on Annie' she says 'Austin's here he's come home from school'. So, my dad used to say, 'oh it's another night is it, blindo', she hadn't a leg to stand on. So, my father had a hard life. Well through that, we were taken away.

We were scattered, my brother went to a boy's home, and we were sent to Oxford to the nun's home, the Nazareth House, the home was called Nazareth House, Cowley Road Oxford, and I remember it very well. and e grow up there as Catholics and, I don't know where my brother went, the one brother that was eligible for help. John, he went to a salvation army home somewhere, they took him, and gave him a, trained him for work there, but we never heard any more about him. So I was left with Winnie in Oxford, just the two of us, and we lived, and we comforted one another. We were found a situation. I went to service, they put me into service, in a place called Rugeley, Staffordshire, and R U G E L E Y, Rugeley, and there, I was very innocent and young. I did what I was told, but I offered to put my hand to anything. I used to watch my mistress cooking. I wouldn't take my eyes off her, and I was picking it up.

Doctor McGill Hanley. I went into service there, and I was a general maid. I could do service, and I could do figures, and I was also got a sprig of nursing in me. He took me out of the kitchen into the surgery to do the paperwork, on the patients, and I sprung off there into nursing. I knew a midwife on the district, and she used to take me out to cases, and she used to say, 'I'll not be well taking you out with me if you can't help me, and she says 'are you afraid of blood?', I said 'no I'm not'. Well I did work with a nurse Black on the district. She gave me work but, she used to give me a bit of pocket money because I was handy. and it's there I picked up midwifery. Looking at her delivering, and I used to carry her bag, and I went with her.

Presenter

Mrs. Newton became a midwife, married, and had two children, although she carried on working, and became a district nurse. She retired when she was in her sixties. After her husband died a few years ago, she went to a residential home. How is she finding living there, what keeps her going?

Mrs Newton

Well, to think that I've got a daughter Pyllis, and she's been a source of consolation to me. Because the boy I had, Henry, the one boy, he was a cesarean section, and I was told I'd have no more, but I knew better, and along came Pyllis, thank god, and she's been a source of consolation. That is Phyllis's, the one thought, I live for her. When I've had a late evening, she's taken me to her house, she's taken me there 'til eleven and twelve and then brought me home. So I've had a good night out, haven't I? She looks after me, she still does, Pyllis does. I don't know what I'd do without her. My son offered to take me but, Pyllis says 'well, I've got my mother now, and she's comfortable, but she says don't take her away', well I wouldn't go. When, I found that I could no longer manage on my own, Pyllis, said 'I'll take you mam', and I says 'where?' she says well, 'the only place we can go to is here'. She says and I know Joan, Joan is the head, she says I'll have a word with Joan, and see if she can fit you in there. You can't stay alone in the bungalow because, I couldn't stand love, only with this stick, and anybody could come in at night and steal what they wanted, and I was getting nervous. Here I've been very happy, I've relieved Pyllis of a lot of responsibility. Because I'm getting now, that I can't walk only with the aid of a stick, and if I fell, I couldn't get up. So I'm best in here aren't I? They do look after me in here. Whatever you ask for, they'll bring you. They'll do their best, they can't do more can they? Candidly speaking, I've no food to find, but the loneliness. Loneliness, I'm lonely. When I think back, I've had a busy life, and now it's all come crash. And it's, it's there I feel it. I've mixed among a lot of people, but of course there's no medicine for that. That, I want to thank god that I've lived as long as I've lived. I'm satisfied with what god has provided, and I think god has been very good. When I was younger I never thought I'd live to be this age, but I am living. Thank god, I mean, with me being in good hands, I might live a bit longer. I'm more independent here. I can help myself on, they leave you to help yourself, which is a very good thing. God helps them that help themselves.

Presenter

Mrs Alderly still lives in the same mining village where she was born in 1907. She was one of fourteen children, but only she, and one sister survived infancy.

Mrs Alderly

Well, I suppose they were the short of nourishment in them days, you know, for them. Because my mother used to go work every day and everything and used to have to go to work to get some food in you see, because there was no, no good on the miners for what they were on strike, you weren't getting nothing. Well my mother used to go to the farm, Edwards is at the farm moth house, she used to do the washing there, and do odd days. Well it's all hard work, we didn't get chance of going anywhere at all, it was just work. The cleaning and washing. We used to have it, washing the, where the coal this is, where there was a boiler there, you have to soak it up to boil, you had to boil in there, all washing hanging out on the line. Used to have to make a fire and dry the washing when it was wet. And of course, this lady said take some food, give them children some.

Of course I used to go with her in there, because I was there I was alright, got my food, used to bring some home for my father and that. I was one of fourteen, to the farm, and I sat there for a number of years, because my mother would keep coming, washing and that, used to do the washing. Because when the old man was ill, there was a nurse in, living in, that we never thought he got better but he did, he was alright, and the son Charles Edwards, he used to go to talk school.

Then when he come home, you see we had to go on the and do so much on the land, different places, different jobs to be done. We lost my mother in 1956, when my mother died. So of course I had to look after my father. So it's I felt useless, I'll have to get a job somewhere. Well, the head mistress come to see me, she says 'do you want some work Sally?' I said 'yes if there is any going'. Well she says 'I want a care taker'. So I went to the infant school care taking, and I had to do the stoking up in the fire hole for getting the radiators hot and everything. The used to have dances in and everything. I was coming home from school at one O'clock in the morning after the dance had finished.

Presenter

In her early forties, she married a man from the same village.

Mrs Alderly

He'd been married before, he'd got two sons. But of course his wife suffered, of course you know he was always drinking. I said I think you ought to be at home with your wife and see to her but, her died. I said you can stop that, I said you're not having that much drinking. He didn't, not when he died he was dying he didn't. He'd always been in the pit. Well he never got no properly he was, because he used to give this pocket money, you've got to manage with that he used to say. I said 'yes, I'll find out I said what they're paying you'. He'd got to have his beer money, that was him. Because I'd got my own wages then, I'd got my wages from, they used to pay us once a month and I was alright then. Yes well you'd got to make a bit you see. 'Well' he says 'you've got your father's money'. I said 'listen, my father pays his way, I have his board and that's enough I said got nothing to do with you'. Oh I I'd got my father because it was his house you see. He bought, when he come out, or when they finished him at the pit, he, he says, we go in he says, 'you be careful how you open door to anyone'. We go in and see the solicitor. He says 'I'm going to buy this house while the money's here'. So they went to the solicitor and paid for the house and that was it.

Presenter

Her father was unhappy about her marriage, but she and her husband and father carried on living in the house. Some years later, her stepson Leonard, was drowned while on holiday.

Mrs Alderly

I know they come down here. They, we were at Blackpool Bill and me, and there'd been an accident that's when we lost Leonard. So I said 'I think you'd better get up.' I was, 'why?' he says 'what's up?' I said, 'surely you've heard what's going on?' I said, they can't find Leonard, that's how I put it to him, he says so it's better get up and get going. I said 'it's no good you thinking of going and drinking'. But anyway, that didn't do any good, he never took any notice of me. His brother come up, he says 'where is he?' I said, 'you know where he is', I said 'don't ask me I've had my belly full of him'. So he says 'well he's got to go to where Leonard's drowned'. Anyway, I said 'you've got to get ready and go and identify that lad'. 'What have I got to go for?' I said 'you're his, you're father I said you damn fool'. So anyway I said, 'Fred and Harry are going with you'. Of course he was drunk when he went, drunk as a lord when he went. So they went and, identified him and took particulars. So they'd got a week like, before they'd bring him home for the funeral.

There was always trouble with him you know, when he'd had beer and that and drinking, you couldn't sleep at night because he was singing all night. And that was him. Because I'd got my father then so, used to come singing and bawling his head off at night and, sing half of the night. Wouldn't go work half of his time. I'd got my own pension, I was older than Bill, I'd got my pension, so I'd got that. I said 'this has got nothing to do with you', I said 'I work damned hard for this, I said it's not your business'. I said 'he's never paid any rent, he's never paid nothing' I said. So, that was that. Well when my father died, the house you see was turned over to me. So I said it'll be alright the house, well don't worry too, I said I can look after it, and got going.

Presenter

Mrs Alderly's husband also died a few years ago. How is she managing now she's living on her own?

Mrs Alderly

Better off, yeah. Because I get so much pension from Bill, because his death was caused through the pit, you see. Well it was the dust from the pit, because he'd only worked in the pit you see. He's worked in the pit all his life. We stopped him at the pit you see with his health, and they used to come and see him, and of course he'd be at the pub. My sister used to come you see 'til she was ill. I went Manchester to her and she was ill, they took her in hospital, of course she died there. She was eight, eighty when she died. That was the biggest blow, you see I said. You see, she come home, and of course he. I said 'look, you no need of come back here Bertie you could have stayed with me at home'. I said 'you don't take any notice of him'. I said 'I pay the rates at home, it's got nowt do with him'. So I said 'you should have stopped with me'. Of course our Bertie I could never abide his rows and his language, it didn't suit her whatever.

So and, of course I had to go to Manchester. So he says 'what am I going to do?' I said 'tha's got a tongue, that goes to shop and get the things what you want'. I don't go out at night because there's so many hooligans about. I used to go up to my cousin's on Boon Hill, and have my bath up there, and have a my meal Fridays, so I have my dinner up there. Well they bring me home when, any time when I was ready, he'd bring me, and they always fetch me on a Sunday.

Oh I'm alright on my own, doesn't bother me whatever. My cousin comes down, is there anything you want and, you've got phone ring up if you want anything. I just do, what bit of shopping there is to do, and that's that. I don't go far at all now. Well I used to go out at night and go up the club and have a game of Bingo and that, and that was it.

Presenter

Miss Jackson was born in 1909, and after a long nursing career, she now lives on her own in Sussex.

Miss Jackson

My parents were married in 1900, and we lived at in Surrey, and I was the fifth of six children, four brothers and a sister, and my father was a GP, and trained at Saint Bartholemew's Hospital in London, and my mother also trained there as a nurse, at a time when nursing was not the sort of thing for a young lady to do. And so her father tried to divert her by taking her out to Australia, to see the Sydney Bridge, and Sydney Bridge was interesting to him, because he was an engineer of that kind. Anyhow, she was not diverted, and she did do her nursing training, and met my father there, and they married in 1900.

Our childhood, I suppose, was very much like anybody's of that time. We had hoops and stilts and that kind of thing, and we went for walks and we learned to ride bicycles, and then as we grow up of course we played tennis and croquet and went to dances and that kind of thing. And in 1921 I went to my first boarding school, and I stayed there for two years. Then Berendon moved from its first and only term at Bickley in Kent, and came down to Berendon, and then I joined then, and had three lovely years, which I enjoyed enormously. Anyhow at the end of 1927 I left, and I spent three years doing this and hat, because I couldn't start my nursing training until I was twenty one.

So first of all I went to Switzerland and learned how to speak a French in their way, which wasn't the French way at all, and I looked after two children, rather poorly I think, and I, did run a girl guide group, and also I enjoyed myself. I did a bit of travelling with friends, and I learned to drive a car, and did all the sort of things that one did do at in that era. And then in 1930 I went to Saint Thomas's hospital, and started my four year training. Because in those days, we did do four years, unless you happened to be a university graduate, when you did only three. University graduates were people who were not so practical we thought, and really we felt that they should have done it the other way round. When I'd finished my training I was asked to go back to the operating theatre, as a charge nurse, or staff nurse as they're called. And then the war came, and we were all, in various places sent out to the country, and I did some theatre, then I went and did an orthopaedic ward. One filled in where ever possible, and however possible, till we got back after the war, from our various places. and after the war, I was then a ward sister for quite a long time as had been arranged originally, and finally I got back to the theatre and stayed there till I finished my time at Saint Thomas's in 1964.

Presenter

For most of her years as a nurse, she actually lived at the hospital.

Miss Jackson

In training one lived in, there was no question of anything else, and after you'd trained you also lived in in rather better rooms perhaps and, you moved up the scale of comfort. It wasn't until after the war, that people started to live out, and only trained staff at that. Well of course living in hospital, it was convenient for your work, but very inconvenient for your outside life. In general, everything was laid on for you, which made life very possible for you to do your work as well as you possibly could. But it did not fit you for living in the big wide world. You then had to think in terms of what you were going to do, when you got to a certain age of retirement, and there was an opportunity when I could get a flat quite close to the hospital,

and I took this opportunity and, when you were off duty, you could shut your front door, and that was that. And so you felt that you really were beginning to live a more normal life.

Presenter

So, what kind of adjustments had she to make when she retired?

Miss Jackson

Time came, when I actually fixed the date, because I knew when I was fifty-five, and that was in 1964, that I could financially manage to live in the big wide world. Because that, is a question of where one lived, and all those things had to be considered, and of course all the time that you had been at the hospital, your finances had been coped with. Any rise in your salary had been dealt with, the tax paid and all those sort of things. Well of course, all that came back on your lap, and you had to think in terms of whether you could afford to have a house.

However, having decided that I was going to do that thing, I then had a holiday, having finally retired, and said to myself, well for the moment, I will put all my furniture in store, because my parents by this time had died, and their house had gone. So I literally had no home of my own. And, for that time, I said to myself, 'Well I'll have a holiday, and I will look around, and I will stay with my friends and relations.' And I found, I was reading the paper one day, and there I saw an advertisement saying, cottage for sale, interesting garden, which pleased me. So I wrote and said, how about it, and they said well, come and see us. So I went down the next weekend, and met the people in this little cottage in Sussex, quite close to the Kent boarder where I had been at school.

I moved in in 1964, and immediately felt at home. I think it's made it much easier to have done a nursing career. Because somehow people don't mind talking to you. And also they're quite ready for you to help them, they don't think you're being nosy. And so that, I've found great satisfaction in having a place where I could entertain my friends, and I had a lot of friends who came to see whether I could manage, and also to enjoy the countryside, because it is a lovely part of the world to live in. And then I found myself saying, 'well I must have something to do'. So meals on wheels came up, and the disabled came up, and I had a certain amount of work in London that I still could do. So there was plenty to do in life. and, as time has gone on, I have had less to do, because I've grown old myself, instead of helping the elderly I'm one of them, and the disabled I still help with. My work in London has disappeared, or finished, but I find my life very full and busy because, you can always do the garden for one thing. You always have friends who come to stay and, you can always be of use you hope to somebody.

And I think that is one of the very important things, to be of some use, even if it's only just taking somebody from the dentist or, picking the meat for somebody or, getting a loaf of bread, and that usefulness, makes for satisfaction. I'm very fortunate to be so mobile, and to have a car, and to be able to drive it still. But to be of use is the great thing.

Presenter

What were her thoughts, about being single as she got older?

Miss Jackson

I must say I've always been very grateful for my independent state, both when I'm working and when I'm retired. I have missed a shoulder to cry on, but equally, I have gained quite a lot from being able to come in when I want to, and not being any, have anybody else worrying about me, coming in late.

I used to go to town quite a lot and come down late in the evening, and to have to get home to satisfy somebody's anxiety, was not in my line. And equally I can read with my meals, I can cook when I want to and eat what I want to, and not have to consider feeding somebody else. Of course when you do have visitors, you do have to do that, and that's a very good thing to do, because you can do it. But, the independent state has been, something that has been a great, something I suppose one's got used to. Because I can remember when I was quite young, and the sort of trend, 19, when I was twenty, twentt to thirty, thinking it is time I got married, because all my friends were married, and that at the time, well there were one or two flutters but, nothing that came to anything.

Once one was thirty, I didn't worry at all about being married. I just sat down and said I'm not going to marry, I'm independent. But you enjoyed other people's marriages, because you'd

got godchildren, and you went and stayed with them, and you saw them their situation. So it's very difficult to balance up what you've missed, with what you have gained. Independence on one side, and the shoulder to cry on, or somebody to help whenever they wanted, when the difficulties arrived.

I have seen so many widows, who have no idea about rates, or income tax or any of those things, and that is one of the things that one has to cope with, whether you're a widow or whether you're independent, and you have to learn it, and when you're a widow you learn it the hard way, and it really grows on you when you're single. So that's an advantage I suppose.