



The Great Getaway – residential camps for older adults

Introduction

During the latter part of 2017, the Australian Camps Association (ACA) staff teamed up with researchers Liz Cyarto PhD and Louise Karch M.Ed, to offer two residential camps for adults over 55. The Great Getaways, run at ACA member camp Licola Wilderness Village in Victoria, aimed to explore the impacts of outdoor experiences on the health and wellbeing of older adults.

While there is no shortage of research around the benefits of outdoor experiences for younger people, there has been a lack of evidence-based programs design for older adults. With 20% of the Australian population forecast to be over 65 years by 2020, it is timely to tailor outdoor programs for this demographic.

These camps followed on from a number of pilot studies previously undertaken by the ACA and work conducted by other organisations such as Active Life Weekends (NSW). Following input from a co-design workshop attended by 14 older adults, one Great Getaway was designed for people seeking very active pursuits (Adventure) and another for those interested in a more relaxed outdoor experience (Have A Try).

Both camps were three days in length and each was attended by twenty older people (mostly women). Participants ranged from 57 to 83 years of age. Most participants had been to a camp as a younger person but only 20% had done so after turning 55. Programs included varying degrees of ‘adventure’ activities (eg high ropes course) and less physically challenging activities such as walking, bush cooking and archery.

Framework

Traditional outdoor education programs employ ‘dynamic tension’ where a person’s sense of safety and security is challenged. Another approach is to incorporate Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2004) in order to facilitate change and growth. The Great Getaways research team applied both approaches.

Positive Psychology was founded on the belief that people want to lead fulfilling lives and to flourish. They can achieve this by maximising:

Positive Emotions, such as joy, pleasure and contentment,

Engagement, which comes from being entirely focused on the task at hand (being in the moment),

Relationships, which allow people to feel loved, supported and valued by others,

Meaning, the feeling that what one does is valuable and worthwhile, and

Accomplishment, through setting and achieving goals.

Together, these five pillars form the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). Significantly, older people are at risk of a poor quality of life because they can lack opportunities to engage in PERMA enhancing activities.

Evaluation

The Australian Camps Association wanted to know what attracted older adults to these programs and what difference it made to their lives. Great Getaway participants were surveyed before and after camp to provide insights regarding program design and to measure the impact of the outdoor experience.

Participants were asked for their reasons for attending the camp. They were also asked to rate the importance of 21 different program characteristics on their choice to attend a Great Getaway. A Healthy Ageing Quiz measured participant's current lifestyle choices and a wellbeing questionnaire assessed PERMA components.

Outcomes

When participants were asked what they hoped to achieve during their Great Getaway, both groups reported that they wanted to meet new people, spend time with 'like-minded' people, have new experiences, be outdoors and be active. For the majority of participants, these expectations were met. The appreciation of being with like-minded people has continued as many participants have continued to develop friendships with fellow campers post program.

All participants were very satisfied with their Great Getaway experience and 100% would recommend it to their friends. Camp operators should take note of the experiences rated most important by the participants:

- Opportunities to improve their physical fitness or health;
- Being in a natural setting;
- Being with people who have similar interests; and
- Having positive experiences to reflect back on.

On average, participants in both groups had healthy lifestyle habits. However, there was a significant improvement in their overall wellbeing. Further, participants reported feeling more confident in their abilities and were more willing to try new things and challenge themselves. Have A Try group members also reported feeling more knowledgeable about their health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

The Great Getaway program and its associated research (a full academic paper is planned for later in 2018 following the completion of a six month post camp follow-up survey) shows clearly that

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dedicated camps tailored for older adults can make an important contribution to their health and wellbeing. An unexpected finding was that a segment of older adults want to experience high intensity, physically challenging activities.

By combining the benefits of social connection, exposure to natural environments, and increased physical activity / challenge, Great Getaway type programs clearly have enormous potential to make a real difference to our quality of life as we age.