What happens to our social relationships as we grow old?

Jon Nussbaum asked that question as a youth. The answers he has found as a teacher and researcher at the University of Oklahoma are helping social gerontologists understand a growing segment of society: the elderly.

“Communication in aging crosses many disciplines—psychology, sociology and anthropology, among others,” Nussbaum says.

A professor of communication, Nussbaum also works as a senior fellow with the Oklahoma Center on Aging at the OU Health Sciences Center. His research has helped destroy myths about the aging process.

“One myth: old people aren’t healthy. That’s not true,” he contends. “People over 60 are healthy. However, economic, structural and political factors force them to adapt under stress. For example, what happens when a spouse or close friend dies? How does an 80-year-old react when a 60-year-old son or daughter caring for them gets sick? The elderly lose their physical mobility. Who cares for them if they break their hip?”

Another myth is that family will always be there to care for elderly relatives. Sometimes that does not happen.

“Often the most important people in the world for the elderly are their friends,” Nussbaum says. “Families try to help as best they can, but often the family has problems of their own: finances, inadequate room or dysfunctional relationships with children. Thus, they can be unprepared to care for an aging relative. In that case, the relative may have to turn to friends or to government for support. So it’s crucial that older people build friendships.”

America lacks enough options for elderly care, Nussbaum says. In some states, an old person faces two options: live with relatives or move to a nursing home.

“We need more levels of care,” he insists. “Some states and other countries like Germany and Sweden offer community-based, long-term care for people who don’t need 24-hour nursing. They have ‘half-way houses’ for the elderly, where they can look after each other and have a nurse visit occasionally. We need those options here. Too often, we put people who don’t need 24-hour care into nursing homes.”

Communication and social interaction for the elderly suffer because of the structural environment of nursing homes, Nussbaum says.

“The structural and economic realities of a nursing home create a pattern of dependency within the residents,” he says. “A primary goal of any institution is to make the working environment as easy as possible for the employees of that institution. If employees of a nursing home can control the channels of communication and relationships, they make their jobs easier. If no one visits or talks to a resident, there are fewer incentives to physically move the person. In other words, less communication for the elderly residents means more efficiency. I call this ‘interactional starvation.’ ”

What happens to the happiness and self-esteem of residents living in such an environment?

“It’s not the primary job of a nursing home to make residents feel good about themselves,” Nussbaum says. “Fortunately, the best nursing homes do make an effort.”

Nussbaum’s teaching and research will help OU students better understand problems of the aging and how to solve them. The Commission on Communication and Aging recently awarded Nussbaum its Scholar of the Year award for his contributions as a teacher, researcher, leader and mentor in the field of communication and aging.

In his letter to Nussbaum notifying him of the award, COCA chair Jim L. Query Jr. quoted from the nominations:

“Jon has made tremendous contributions to the discipline. His books are essentially the backbone of our communication and aging courses at

Doctoral graduate student Kevin Wright, left, stops his adviser, communications professor Jon Nussbaum, on the stairs of Burton Hall.
Jon Nussbaum was one of the first communication researchers to be concerned with the impact of the long-term health care facility on the institutionalized elderly.

The graduate and undergraduate level, and his research has demonstrated the important role communication plays in the lives of the elderly. It would be difficult to teach a course in communication and aging without addressing his work.

"Very few communication researchers were even interested in the impact the long-term health care facility has on the institutionalized elderly until Dr. Nussbaum and his students accepted the challenge."

"Jon has published five books in the area of communication and aging, co-edited a special issue of Communication Research focusing on communication and the elderly, written 11 book chapters, and he has presented more than 20 convention papers pertaining to communication and aging. Using a life span developmental perspective, Jon Nussbaum has successfully promoted the study of communication and aging both within and outside the communication discipline. Additionally, Jon has directly contributed to the development of several young scholars in the area; my best estimate would be more than 50 individuals."

Nussbaum will follow the careers of those graduate students to evaluate his own professional achievements, he says.

"Career perfection for any professor is for his or her graduate students to make a difference in society," Nussbaum explains. "If I can teach students so that they go into the world and make a higher mark than I have done, then I will have done my job."

At OU Nussbaum has taught courses in communication and aging, undergraduate statistics, life span development, small group communication and interpersonal communication. In addition to his published research, Nussbaum consistently receives high teaching evaluations from his students.

Nussbaum enjoys his close working relationship with the OU Health Sciences Center. At the Oklahoma Center on Aging—an interdisciplinary group of scholars who conduct research, service and education in geriatrics and gerontology—Nussbaum has worked with Shirley Travis in the College of Nursing, David Falcone at the School of Public Health, Marie Bernard in the College of Medicine, Jim McCaul and other scholars to write research grants and study all aspects of gerontology and geriatrics.

"We focus on areas such as minority aging, physician-patient interaction and other topics which benefit the public," Nussbaum explains. "For example, if we discover better ways to care for Alzheimer's disease, we can start training the health care providers, because the Oklahoma Center on Aging is ultimately a center of education."

After serving 14 years on the OU faculty and devoting his entire career to social gerontology, Nussbaum cares about the future of our elderly citizens.

"One point on the life span is no more important than any other," he says. "If you haven't achieved your goals by 65, there's no reason to stop developing as a person. Communication is a wonderful tool to explore the world regardless of age, to make new friends and discover challenges. Your feet are not in cement."

"Different relationships will serve you well at different points in your life," he adds. "For example, at 70 or 80, sibling relationships re-emerge; brothers and sisters become closer. Conversely, relationships with children may grow more difficult. Professional relationships, such as with physicians and other health care providers, increase in importance. Older adults must assert themselves, take more responsibility and negotiate actively. Each individual should ask questions and be an advocate for himself or herself. As we age, the more independent we are, the happier we may be."

—Robert Ferrier