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Voices of Lesbian Women Living Longer: Becoming Who We Are

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In this feminist phenomenological study informed by a caring philosophy the stories and responses of lesbian women who are growing older were explored. There is little nursing literature about the needs of this often invisible group of women. Twelve self-identified lesbian women 55 years of age or older were interviewed and asked, "What is it like to be a lesbian woman who is growing older?" The women were all white, mainly middle-income, well-educated, and spoke English. Transcriptions of the stories were analyzed according to van Manen's (1990) approach.

Initially, seven descriptive themes were identified from the narratives: age and aging; relationships with families, in particular with mothers; partnerships, intimate relationships, and sexual identities; friendships and community; health; religion and spirituality; and financial issues. After further analysis and reflection, five interpretive themes emerged: going with the flow and living longer; the powerful influence of mothers as models; intimate, sexual beings; bonds that grow and gain importance over time; and, physical, emotional, and spiritual health become the whole. Finally, an integrative theme was identified: *becoming who we are*. The women did not consider themselves to be growing older, but going with the flow and living longer in a life-long process. The voices of the women were carefully preserved in all aspects of the study.

Findings suggested that the mother-daughter relationship greatly influenced the women's lives, positively or negatively. Friendships and lesbian community were important for companionship, understanding, sharing, and support. Concerns about aging alone, losing their good health, and becoming a burden on family or friends were evoked.