The wonderful African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child,” unfortunately has been distorted in a recent political campaign. Initially, the proverb meant only that childrearing is a process that evolves within the context of a caring community, beginning with the family but extending to all members of the community who naturally have a stake in seeing that children become good citizens of that society. In terms of professional helping, it has long been recognized that we must view the person in his or her environmental context; the two are inseparable, with each affecting and being affected by the other. This series of transactions remains vital throughout the life course. An older person is equally involved with his or her families, which might include multiple generations of families, and with the “village,” that is, with other individuals, small groups, organizations, and the community itself, as well as the cultures (majority and minority, if any) and physical environment. The African proverb is simply another expression for the ecological-systems perspective that we have adopted in this book.

There is no way to avoid the myriad numbers of interactions between an individual and the social surroundings. People are, part and parcel, integral with the dynamic social experience. Recognizing this truism, we can make use of it as a psychosocial response to
the physical events of aging that occur that cause tears in this social fabric. We believe that people who are engaged in successful living throughout their lives, and especially in advanced age, maintain a firm integration within significant communities.

When we speak of communities in this way, we are not suggesting the rigid geographic or political towns or cities as communities are sometimes called. Although towns and cities (more likely neighborhoods within cities) might meet our expectations for communities, we use the term community to suggest simply those patterns of interconnections among people, who may or may not be individually known to one another, that are aimed at some generally shared goals and contained in a relatively well-defined geographic space. With this definition, we are able to consider neighborhood communities, church communities, cultural communities, and some organizational communities. Even families exist and function within this understanding of community. With the expanding future of electronic networks, it may be that some families will have members who live at great distances from one another, but still have frequent communications, even more so than is presently the case with telephones. When this occurs in large numbers, sociologists may have to redefine the meaning of geographic-based communities. For the purpose at hand, we believe that it is extremely valuable for helping professionals to expand their views of community to include all of those associative groupings that might serve the purpose of village in the African proverb.

In this chapter we explore the ways that small groups (including families), institutions, and sociocultural units may be used to prevent predictable problems, to protect clients’ existing strengths, and to promote the achievement of client goals. While we follow the general pattern of previous chapters, in this chapter we combine the protective and promotive aspects of primary prevention along with the traditional preventive aspects.

Using Family and Small Groups to Prevent Stress and to Protect and Promote Social Supports
Open Communication Systems
Family Councils
Cooperative Group Ventures