

Shrinking World of Elders

As we get older more and more of our friends don't.

Each year an elder's social reach shrinks until almost no one needs their help, their advice, or even their shoulder to lean on.

It has been many years since they went to work every day with all the people they interacted with or had a busy families and neighbors in constant orbit around them. The golf stopped after the hip replacement. Without a ride it is now hard to get to church. The grand kids are too old to need babysitting anymore and with their busy schedules maybe they will be at Thanksgiving dinner. There is saying hello to the grocery checkout person, but they don't really care.

Then there is that awful word, **burden**, and becoming a burden is the last thing most elders want to have happen. Yes there some elders who can become professional burdens but they are not who we are talking about today. Often not wanting to be a burden to family or friends causes even more isolation.

Family is great but they're not the same as the friends that knew how to make you laugh out loud. Or did not need to be told what your opinions are because they already knew and you both stopped trying change the other's opinion long ago. You just accepted each other as you were and that was good enough. In fact it was very good.

What can we do to help an isolated elder?

Well, you can force them to go to the community center or you can visit every Tuesday even though it is inconvenient and they will know it. Maybe you could hold a séance so they can talk with their deceased friends. In other words there is no easy fix and there is only one person that can suggest a real solution, so ask them. Let them know that you are aware of elder isolation and ask them to tell you what it is like. If you can achieve nothing more than getting span agreement that isolation does exists, you will have made progress and can start to work on ways to improve the situation.

“You Aren’t the Boss of Me”

I recently heard my grandchildren arguing, when one of them used this age-old retort to get her brother to leave her alone. It is a distinct way to assert one’s independence with little or no chance of it being misunderstood. As we grow older, we often assert our independence as well, but rarely as clearly as “You aren’t the boss of me”.

We learn to be subtle, to try and not hurt the feelings of those around us, and not to start an argument. This also causes us to often be misunderstood, or to be ineffective in communicating how strongly we feel.

The elders in our lives are often struggling to maintain their independence as vigorously as a child is trying to gain theirs. Angry replies to offers of help are an indicator, as well as responses like “I can take care of that”, “Please don’t bother”, or “That’s not necessary”, or “I’ll drive myself”. They may really be saying “You aren’t the boss of me”.

If we are going to be effective when assisting an elder, we must constantly consider their fear of losing control. They often see the issue as black and white and refuse any help of any kind, as they judge that it will be the crack in the dam that will lead to their total dependence on others. Of course refusing all help, many times is the cause of their worst nightmare, as it can lead to a major incident such as getting scammed, becoming ill due to medication errors, crashing the car, etc. When this happens, not only will they lose their independence, but you will suddenly be thrust into this unfamiliar situation without a clue as what to do, or how to do it.

The process of helping should be started with a discussion about independence. Encourage them to tell you how they feel about maintaining an independent lifestyle. Ask what they are planning to do in regard to assuring that they can maintain the maximum amount of independence for the maximum amount of time. When they feel you are empathetic and that you understand and support their wishes and desires, it will be easier to work together making plans to achieve that goal. When they are assured you will not rush in and take over at your first chance, real communication and effective assistance will begin.

Start small. Each thing you do together will show them you do respect their independence and will also teach you how to help without “Being the boss of them”.

Allow Natural Death

Communication is all about what is being heard, not about what is being said.

Discussions and decisions about the end of life are filled with emotions, questions, uncertainties, and significant consequences. So, finding ways to express an idea that will make it easier to be accurately heard and understood is very important.

We have been relying on Living Wills and Do Not Resuscitate Orders (DNRO) as the primary way to describe the wishes for care at the end of life. These documents have been designed, amended, and modified in an almost never-ending process. Living Wills are now often many pages long trying to assure that what is being said will be upheld if a dispute should arise. A DNRO is normally only accepted if it is presented on the standard printed format and often only if it is also on the correct color paper. Those providing the care want to assure there will be no variances or potential misunderstandings when they follow their detailed, established DNRO protocols.

This works well for the courts and the healthcare providers, but what about us non-professionals, who are trying to understand. What does this all mean for us and our family and what consequences will occur from the choices we are being asked to make? There is a small but growing movement that is helping us lay people hear and understand by promoting the use of the term, Allow Natural Death. When I first heard Allow Natural Death, I got it right away and I bet you do too.

Healthcare professionals still need their definitively defined procedures and lawyers still need their exacting language to win their battles in the courtroom. So be it, don't change the existing documents, just add Allow Natural Death to the titles of the forms and please, when you professionals are talking to us remember it only matters what we hear, so please use Allow Natural Death as your lay person terminology. Ask us if we wish to Allow Natural Death then stand back and let us absorb the concept and decide what side of the fence we want to be on. We will ask when we have questions, and then you can answer that question, but please don't lose us in the details.