

Living Alone among Us

In the last week I have been made aware of three homes having much in common. At some point in time, or, more likely, very gradually over time, their surroundings fell away from their control to the point of becoming unsafe and unhealthy.

The three houses are homes of elderly people living alone. These senior citizens are intelligent, engaging people with varying degrees of capability when it comes to self-care. They have pretty good vision and yet their homes are infested with mice, clutter and dirt. They live with varying degrees of garbage, food containers, moldy food, moth infested food and food contaminated by the mice. The mice seek, in addition to the food, warmth and nesting materials. Seeking warmth, they may make nests at this time of year behind refrigerators (enjoying the warmth of the motor), stoves and heaters, in addition to corners in closets and cupboards. Always in search of nesting materials, mice love food infused pot-holders, cloth and paper of any kind.

If the mice are not dealt with when they first arrive, they multiply very quickly. Two seen, indicates many more unseen. For every dropping found there is much, much more urine being dribbled everywhere along their trail. After a while the urine creates a foul odor and the mice create dust, bring disease and carry mites. Some people experience allergic reactions to bug bites, including those from tiny unseen mites. A flea “bomb” may be in order.

Caring neighbors and friends are often the ones dealing with making these homes cleaner and safer. Here are some suggestions for the big clean up:

If the home really smells, you have to get rid of all the soft goods, for they hold the odors. That includes clothing, rugs, upholstered furniture and such soft items as stuffed animals.

Purchase some large clear plastic bins. In order to expedite the cleaning process, use these bins for any documents that may be important. If it is in question, toss it in a bin and put it aside for examining later. Place those bins in a place away from the big clean-up. Wash the walls, floors, cabinets and shelves.

Purchase some small clear bins for storing dry goods. It is very important that they be clear for easy identification. Storing all, and I mean all, the dry goods in these bins will help to keep the mice disinterested in these items and this place of storage.

Now that you have cleaned the home and created an environment fairly uninviting to mice, it is time to try to prevent their entry. They usually enter a house where pipes and conduit enter. Look under and behind the stove and sink for these small openings, keeping in mind that a dime-size hole is sufficient for a mouse. Stuff the hole with steel wool and then squirt some spray insulation over that. Do the same with cracks in the foundation. Set some traps. With traps, you won't have to worry about poison or mice dying within the home. I have been told that mice like vanilla and they are also so attracted to nesting materials that string or cotton balls are enough to lure them into a trap.

There. The house is fairly clean and you have saved important documents. The elderly person probably still needs all kinds of help in order to live “alone”. They need companionship and maybe they get that by visiting their local Council On Aging. They probably need assistance with getting bathed safely, shopping, house cleaning, seasonal maintenance and bill paying. They probably need a health proxy. That means someone needs to be close enough, trusted enough and patient enough to have conversations with this person about their present life and their future. What do they wish? What are their hopes?

You are walking a fine line when it comes to balancing respect for their independence and you having to make important decisions for them. The process begins with talking, even bluntly so, about the consequences of those decisions. If they feel strongly about living on their own, they may need to allow assistance in order for that to continue.

If you can assist with cleaning or wish to help by donating rubbish bags, a dumpster or plastic bins, contact me. Our elderly may be living alone but they don't have to be left alone.

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