

7-6-12 Resistance to Assistance

Aging can be so challenging, in and of itself, but when it heads towards a long list of disabilities, it can seem downright impossible to know when to do what about that growing list of problems. The aging one can feel anything from anger to humiliation, to passive and depressed at the ever downward spiraling circumstances. The family members can feel stuck with not knowing how to solve problems without going against their loved ones' wishes.

When an elderly person can no longer care for her or himself, the family has some very difficult decisions to make. They vary, of course, from one family to another. There are some frequently seen factors, though, entangled in the decision making; one of them is the wishes of the elder and the attitude of the family in response to their loved ones' wish list. The elder can be stubborn and resentful of any change, insisting that assistance is not needed and that is all there is to it! If they don't have their health, they at least still have their pride.

Family members may not realize they might be the least capable of convincing their parent or grandparent to cooperate with what needs to be done. Families are accustomed to being honest with each other, even to the point of arguing, but, in the end, and over the years, it all works out and we forgive the outbursts, because we're family. That system may have worked just fine for decades on end but when it comes to the elder in need of help, family members may not be able to convince their aging parent to wash or eat or allow the bed to be changed. That adds up to a series of problems when people stop visiting because of the stench or your loved one loses weight and still refuses to go to the doctor. She hasn't needed one in eighty years, why should she see one now? And housekeeping help? No way! It is not needed!

So, even though the extended family cares deeply and lovingly, good and amazing surprises are sometimes in store when outside help enters the picture. Of course, there are still personality dynamics and communication skills involved as variables in the success rate of working with outside resources. But, still, after heels-dug-in resistance from the aged person who is in complete denial of the need for assistance, in walks a home health aide who says hello and it's time to change the bed and your grandmother says, "Okay."

It may not even occur to those who are in the midst of doing their best with juggling their own life and caring for the aged or disabled one in their life that outside help may succeed where they could not. It happens all the time, though. It's just the way it goes because others can sidestep the disagreements and dynamics of families. That comes in rather handy and can be such a relief! The newly discovered cooperation and assistance is not only a relief to see; the needed help leading to hoped for improvements is also a huge release of guilt and worry for those who are truly stricken with and even paralyzed by their love.

Rather than waiting and struggling alone through the long heart breaking process of care giving, it is a good idea to share the concerns with others who can help. A call to your local council on aging and a call to your local board of health can put you in touch with services so

desperately needed, by the disabled one and by the care giver. Did you know that you can even make that call anonymously? You might be a neighbor or friend or even a family member at wits end and an anonymous call can trigger a friendly knock on the door by an outreach person from the council on aging, who can then begin to explain other services such home health aides, meals on wheels, transportation to medical appointments, housekeeping services and more.

When those calls are not made, it is heart wrenching to see the results of a long standing downward spiral of failed attempts despite good intentions. If I get involved because of a call from dispatch telling me that the medical response people have concerns, then too much time has lapsed. If the medics have concerns, then I am called to witness housing conditions that have become unsafe and unsanitary, usually to the point of no return.

Care taker and compassion fatigue takes an enormous toll. If you know anyone with that responsibility, please urge your friend to seek assistance, for it is there. No, it doesn't always go smoothly or result in the happy ending so desired but the additional help does lead to the direction needed, as determined by meeting and evaluating the family's needs. By addressing the needs as early as possible, I might not even receive that call from medics. I don't mind the call; I just want people to be helped as soon as possible. And the help is there.

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