

Aging Gracefully

Taking care of aging parents is a challenge, especially if they do not want to acknowledge their decline in physical and cognitive abilities. No matter how well we eat, how much we exercise, how many supplements we take, there is nothing that stops the aging process. Granted, we all age at different rates, but eventually our bodies wear out, and we can no longer do things as easily as we once did. You must be strong and well prepared when it comes to taking care of an aging loved one. To assist you as you go through the process of aging with your loved one, here are the top seven common mistakes made by seniors and their families.

1. Not planning ahead, even for a health care crisis

Many of us will require assistance or even full care as we age. However, many people refuse to admit this and give up their freedoms. Fear of aging and a need to hold on to their independence causes many seniors not to ask for help. Those in the early stages of dementia, for example, may not recognize their need. Family members need to prepare themselves so if a health care crisis does occur, their aging loved one will have some protection. It requires learning about Medicare, Medicaid, insurance policies, legal forms and health care options available. Being prepared, can decrease stress and anxiety in a time of crisis, and give you a sense of confidence as you assist your aging parent in making important decisions.

2. Denial

Adults who have a fear of aging sometimes neglect signs of poor health. They delay going to the doctor until the condition worsens. Such a delay can result in more advanced stages of a condition. Many aging adults feel as if they can fight the process and refuse to wear hearing aids, braces or walking aids. Family members often do not address these behaviors as they are met with strong resistance. This can be a difficult and uncomfortable situation for many family members. Sometimes having a family meeting with a person who your parent respects and trusts will open the lines of communication.

3. Reluctance

Adults who refuse to age gracefully are often reluctant to admit they need assistance because this means they are growing old. It can be rough on an aging adult's self-esteem to notice that they struggle with simple tasks. It can also make them feel as if they have no other choice but to give up their independence or become a burden to their family. Family members may also struggle with discussing aging relatives needing care because of family dynamics. Within the family there may be challenges of overcoming guilt, anxiety or even anger. It is important that you make your aging parent aware that you are there to support them and not to interfere; that their safety and health are your utmost concern.

4. Limited awareness of all the options and levels of care

The health care delivery system can be overwhelming. Many families have no idea where to begin looking for assistance or what services and options are available. There are many county, state and senior services that can provide direct access to specific care providers. Your local agency on aging can direct you to programs and services that are specific to your area. You clergy member may be able to assist you in directing you and your family members to professionals that have successfully supported other church members. You may want to utilize the services of a care manager or elder-care consultant to assist you in maneuvering the health care system. These individuals are specialized in the care of the aging population and can advocate, make recommendations and assist in overseeing every aspect of the care and services that are needed for your aging parent.

5. Family disagreement

Family members might disagree on what care is needed and where it should come from, which could lead to frustration and inaction. Family rivalries and dynamics can resurface and cause more anxiety about making decisions. Cultural differences may also make things difficult, especially if members that have been uninvolved in their parents care are suddenly expected to take charge. It also could be that a family member who has previously held a large part in the care-taking is not allowed to make decisions. It is important to focus, as a group, on what your parents would want and provide them with the best possible care in a safe and comfortable environment. In these situations, an outside objective third party is

recommended. There are elder-care facilitators, care managers and elder-care consultants to assist your family through this process.

6. Misunderstanding of what health insurance, long-term care, and supplements provide

It is important for seniors and their family members to investigate and understand what Medicare, Medicare supplements and Medicaid covers. If your aging parent has long term care insurance, it is also important to review waiting periods, cost of living riders and home care coverage. This is the first time many family members hear the term, "spend down." Spend down is depleting private or family finances to the point where an individual is sufficiently poor to meet the eligibility criteria for Medicaid. The spend down process and transition to poverty can involve multiple losses. It is wise to consult an elder care attorney early, before a crisis to assist you in planning to protect your aging parent's assets.

7. Inability to discuss end of life issues

Aging gracefully is hard when our culture bombards us with messages about how to avoid growing older. We cannot avoid growing older or dying, so we must be prepared for it. We should, however, be able to make decisions about how to stay alive and healthy for as long as possible. Some choose multiple medical tests, invasive and painful procedures and multiple admissions to the hospital to avoid death at all costs. Others, do not discuss death and do not express their wishes to others, and leave the difficult decisions to family members. Even when it feels like there is nothing left, we can still have a say in whether or not we die with dignity.

Establish advanced directives now. Five Wishes, an advanced directive form, is very complete and unique among all other living will and health agent forms because it looks to all of a person's needs: medical, personal, emotional and spiritual. Five Wishes also encourages discussing your wishes with your family and physician. Complete durable power of attorney for finances and durable power attorney for health care. These simple documents allow another person to make financial and health decisions for you if you should you become incapacitated in the future. You should also discuss developing a will and planning funeral arrangements. This will not only save you money, but by preparing for your final arrangements your family will have comfort in knowing that your final wishes are being honored. It will alleviate stress and allow them to celebrate you and your life.

The resources are there to help family members become better informed and feel more empowered about assisting or even just dealing with the issues of your aging parent. You just need to take the time, have the energy and the commitment to getting the right assistance at the right time.

Realize that your parents are adults and are responsible for their own lives. You can only do what they will allow you to do. Remember that if they speak or act negatively towards you it is nothing personal. They are afraid of aging, changing, losing independence, and losing control over their lives.