

Aging Gracefully, or Not? Seven Common Mistakes.

Taking care of aging parents is not an easy task. Many in our aging society are not aging gracefully, and fighting or ignoring 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. Taking care of an aging loved one is not for sissies! To assist you as you go through the process of aging with your loved one, here are the top 8 common mistakes made by seniors and their families.

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

Common sense tells us that as we age we should expect to require some assistance, or even total care at some point. Yet, many aging adults find aging gracefully difficult. 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 may not recognize their need. Family members need to prepare themselves so that if a health care crisis does occur that their aging loved one will have some protection. Preparing for this will take time and energy. 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

Many adults who have a fear of aging neglect signs of poor health. Many overlook health problems for such reasons as worrying about paying their co-pay, so 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 and having a person that your parent respects and trusts will open the lines of communication.

3. Reluctance

Not aging gracefully causes many adults to be reluctant to discuss that they need assistance, because to admit that fact means they are growing old. To many aging adults, that is a blow to their self esteem and many perceive that they must give up their independence or become a burden to the family. Family members many times are reluctant to bring up the subject of your aging parent needing care due to 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. Are not aware of all the options and levels of care available

The health care delivery system can be overwhelming. Many families have no idea where to begin to look 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. Your 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 eldercare consultant to assist you in maneuvering the health care system. These are individuals that specialize 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

Inaction by family members due to differences of opinion within a family as to what care is needed, and where and from whom it should come. Nothing can revive conflicts in adult siblings like making decisions about an aging parent. All the old roles, parents favorite, the black sheep, the unresolved battles and family rivalries resurface. Old family dynamics come back, and adult siblings can sabotage wise decisions during those anxiety producing conversations about the aging parent. There are also cultural differences, where the eldest son, no matter what his relationship with his aging parents has been, is expected to be the decision maker in those families. Many of the sisters/daughters in these cultures are not involved in the decision making process, even though they are the ones that have been providing the care. 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 eldercare facilitators, care managers and eldercare 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 no longer a part of our culture. Billions of dollars are spent



trying to avoid growing old. It is a fact that no one lives forever. We all are going to die. If we don't die young, we are going to die old. So we should prepare for this time. We should be able to say what we want to do to stay alive.

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. This takes a terrible toll on a family during a very difficult time. There is such a thing as dying with dignity. It is the very last thing we can have a say in as we age. 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 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 with 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. Being proactive and planning ahead makes this process much easier. Realize that your parents are adults and are responsible for their own lives.

You can only do what they will allow you to do. Hang in there and continue to work with your parents and do not take what they are saying personally. It is about them and their fears of aging and change, fear of loss of independence and fear of losing control over their lives.