

# RESPECTING YOUR ELDERERS



So many people walk right by the elderly without giving them even a second chance, while others seem to feel that they are just in the way. The elderly are still people and they are still trying to hold onto what is left of their years and their dignity, most

living on social security checks just to get by. They find it hard in a society where it seems their age plays such a factor in how we treat them.

Elderly individuals have done somewhat of an about-face and have become, in many ways, like their children's children. They have problems caring for themselves. They have difficulty with memory. They have difficulty with vision and hearing. Their lives have been turned upside down with difficulties that render them somewhat helpless in caring for themselves.

As a child or caregiver of an elder, it is sometimes difficult to remember that the elderly were once vibrant young adults, capable of making their own decisions in life—capable of working, loving others and raising children themselves. It's easy to treat them as small children, scolding them or talking down to them in an attempt to cajole them into taking a bath or dressing themselves.

The elderly have many disabilities which make it all too easy to disrespect them and to treat them like children. Some of these include:

- Visual difficulties. The elderly suffer from farsightedness, macular degeneration or cataracts, along

with the nearsightedness they may have had in their youth. They have problems recognizing pills and reading, so they often can't read documents or even their mail and need help doing these things.

- Hearing Difficulties. Presbycusis is the loss of hearing that gradually occurs in most individuals as they grow older. Hearing loss is a common disorder associated with aging. About 30-35 percent of adults between the ages of 65 and 75 years have a hearing loss. It is estimated that 40-50 percent of people 75 and older have a hearing loss.

- Difficulties in memory. Memory difficulties can be mild and will not progress to dementia but it can be an early sign of either vascular or Alzheimer's dementia and can deeply frustrate the affected individual and his or her family.

- Physical frailty. Many elderly individuals cannot move around as easily and therefore have problems with bathing, cooking for themselves, dressing themselves and just getting around the house.

- Financial incompetence. While either due to dementia or simple confusion, the elderly person often cannot master even simple financial papers and are vulnerable to scams and forgetting to pay bills.

These disabilities make it easier for those of us who are able adults to treat these individuals like children—to disrespect their status as our elders and human beings worthy of love and respect. There are many ways we can help them to function at their highest level of functioning and to treat them with the respect they deserve.

## Are you guilty of disrespecting your elders?

Consider the following scenarios that indicate you might be disrespecting the elderly:

- Do you enter a room and remember to greet every single person in the room, including elders? When

you visit a friend's home, do you remember to take your leave from the elders of that house?

- When your friends come visiting, do you introduce them to your elders? [Even if it a simple nod or a 'Hi' and 'Bye', do not ignore elders.]
- Do you raise your voice when you argue or do you stay calm?
- Do you try to assume control of all activities at home – not telling your mother where you plan to go out, not letting your father listen to his favorite radio station, not seeking permission before changing the channels on TV?
- Do you always stay absent on important days in the family? All of these are signs of disrespect of the elderly.

## Things We Can Do to Enhance the Respect of the Elderly

Showing respect for the elderly takes time and patience. This is the one way in which the elderly are like children. Patience is a necessity and must be exerted at all times. The elderly think more slowly and carefully than do younger people so you need to take the time and patience to speak slowly to them and explain things simply and clearly. These are the things that can help you take care of the elderly and treat them with respect.

- Take the time to speak slowly. The elderly person who is confused does not process words as clearly and as quickly as a younger person. Hearing difficulties can further compound the process. When giving them instructions, speak the instructions one at a time and make sure they repeat back each part of the instruction before going on. Don't be patronizing in your approach but matter-of-fact and just speak more slowly.

*Nan was an 85 year old woman with presbycusis who had only about 10 percent of her hearing ability. Her mind was completely sound and she became frustrated when her caregiver daughter spoke to her in a normal tone of voice, failing to account for her hearing difficulties. She finally told her daughter that she didn't have the hearing she once had and that rapid, high-pitched, moderate volume speech was unintelligible to her. When her daughter spoke more slowly and ascertained that her mother understood what she was telling her, their whole relationship changed.*

- Don't ignore the presence of the elderly person in the room. When the elderly are present, they are often shuttled to a spot in the corner of the room and then summarily ignored. No one wants to be shouting at the individual or talking down to them so nobody talks at all, leaving the elderly person ashamed and hurt.

*Amos was wheelchair-bound and when there were family reunions, he was brought into the living room or dining room and then ignored except for the occasional "yes" and "hi". Amos could hear fairly well and was of sound mind so when a child came up to him and began talking to him like he was a capable adult, he engaged nicely with her, surprising the others who thought he was feeble-minded because of his advanced age and frailty. Other family members began asking him questions about the "old days" and it was a family reunion few forgot. No one forgot about Amos after that event occurred.*

- Don't talk to the elderly like they were a baby. Baby talk goes over really poorly with the elderly person who often has enough mental capacity to know they are being talked down to. Avoid talking to them like they were a three-year old and you will get less frustration and anger from them.

*Marguerite was an 87 year-old woman whose daughter cared for her at home. Her daughter began talking baby-talk to Marguerite when the older woman developed moderate dementia. Still, her daughter had trouble getting her mother to cooperate with feeding and cares when she spoke to her like, "Let's eat our num-nums". When a friend pointed out that the older woman probably didn't like being treated that way, her daughter changed and remembered to talk to her mother in an adult manner, using simple cues and ways of speaking, Marguerite cooperated much more with her cares and the mother-daughter bond was strengthened.*

- Respect the elderly person's privacy. While the elderly person needs help with toileting and dressing, toileting or dressing them with the door open is inappropriate and embarrassing to the elderly person. Treat the elderly person how you would like to be treated in a similar circumstance.

*George was an elderly man in a nursing facility who was surprised when an attendant left him toileting in the restroom with the door open. He couldn't get up to close the door himself and was embarrassed*

when an elderly demented woman walked into his room and began talking to him while he was on the toilet. When a staff member was notified of the indiscretion, a new policy was established that recommended that doors be closed with all changing and toileting of residents.

- Include the elderly in family meals and discussions. The elderly are often left at home when there are family gatherings such as meals or other family reunions because the family thinks the elderly person is “too much trouble” or “won’t enjoy themselves.” No one wants to be responsible for the elderly so they just leave them at home. They fail to recognize that socialization is important for the elderly and they can have a valuable role in family functions.

*Georgina was a slightly mentally impaired elderly woman, the matriarch of a large family. Because she sometimes said strange things and needed help with eating, no one wanted to invite her to the frequent family gatherings the family had. When Georgina heard of this, she was distraught—thinking that her family didn’t love her any more. Her nephew heard of her feelings on the subject and made the commitment to bring her to all family functions. Members of the family became more comfortable having Georgina around and took turns helping her eat at the table. Georgina’s spirits rose appreciably.*

Simply put, it is a good idea to show respect to everybody, even those who are elderly—especially the elderly because they carry the age and wisdom to be helpful to a family. As a whole, the elderly have done much for their family over the years, directly or indirectly, and are owed much in the way of kindness, love and respect.

And when we show them respect, whether it is by touching their feet, or kissing their hands, or offering to massage their legs, these are ways of expressing love and gratitude to them. Besides, elders have also been through all the phases that younger people are

going through and know a little more about the world than you do. However much you disagree with them, give them credit for their experience.

It is likely that you do not always agree with the beliefs and the sentiments of your elders. But remember that even this is nothing new. All younger generations have always disagreed with their elders and it is these differences that bring changes in human society. Why, then, do we say that the modern generation has lost respect for elders? Partly, this is because, with changing times and cultural influences, youngsters no longer know what is interpreted as disrespect to elders. For instance, in earlier times, children would not yell back at their elders. Yes, there were disagreements and debates; there always have been. But youngsters would quietly express their views and if there were arguments, they would not raise their voices.

Nowadays, children fight back, causing even more aggravation to their elders.. The result is an ugly war of words, with each person trying to out-shout the other. Children and young adults do not recognize the value of elders and so they get forgotten and left behind in important matters of the family.

Another example: According to some traditions, younger people do not sit on a higher level than their elders. Therefore, if there were no space on sofas or chairs, young people would immediately give up their places, and sit on the carpet. In buses and trains, youngsters were expected to give up their places to older people.

This is not a question of who has more rights. It is simply that those who are younger have the strength (or are expected to) bear discomfort, or tolerate unpleasantness, and care for our elderly so it is natural to show consideration to those who are older and perhaps, at a slight disadvantage. And when you do simple things as a mark of respect, elders become aware that younger people care for them, and they respond with affection and kindness.

