

Caregiving on the Receiving End

By Pat Baker

It is often very easy for us to give of ourselves to others but we all know that person who gives and gives but when they need help, they refuse to receive it. Being able to receive graciously is a gift. I facilitate three caregiver support groups. I hear from lots of caregivers from the caregiver point of view. In this article I'd like for us to think about the point of view of the person who is receiving the care.

One of my favorite books is Wendy Lustbader's book *What's Worth Knowing*. She uses the format of interviewing several older adults and asking them "what is worth knowing" about a certain topic. I'm going to use that same format about what is worth knowing from someone who is receiving the care.

60 IS DIFFERENT THAN 90, YOU CAN'T LUMP EVERYONE TOGETHER

Often as a caregiver we get sucked into the stereotypes of older persons and if we know a disabled 60 year old or a frisky 90 year old then we expect the person we are caring for to be the same.

That can lead to resentment or unmet expectations.

We need to realize, for the sake of the person receiving care, that each person ages differently.

We need to treat that person as who they are, not as who we want them to be or expect them to be.

OLD AGE IS NOT FOR SISSIES

A care receiver's life can be very humbling and very hard to take. They find themselves outliving friends, family, spouses, children or grandchildren. Also, the losses of an older person go beyond the obvious loss of death. Other losses include independence, health, home, income, and security to name a few.

Problems arise and the caregiver and care receiver find that they arrive at two very different solutions; one grounded by what the older person's life experience is saying to them, the other on what the caregiver thinks is the right thing to do. Someone once said that a caregiver and care receiver should have one ground rule; there is no single "right" answer. When they accept that, they stop resisting any opinion except their own and they become open to seeing where someone else is coming from. That's the beginning of a constructive dialogue and an easier life for both parties.

LISTENING IS REALLY IMPORTANT

I often think when problems arise in a caregiving situation one of the main reasons is that people stop listening, both the caregiver and care receiver. The caregiver gets wrapped up in all the



challenges they are dealing with and stops listening to the care receiver. Often times that is all they need to do to solve a problem - just let the care receiver have their say. Even a person with dementia needs to be listened to.

The care receiver gets so bogged down with their loss of independence that they never ask what the caregiver is thinking or how they are dealing with a certain situation. We need to remember that care receivers are not “less than” because they need care and caregivers are not “better than” because they give care.



PERSONS WHO FIND SUCCESS IN OLD AGE HAVE LEARNED TO LIKE THEIR OWN COMPANY

Many times I have heard a caregiver complain “mother just doesn’t want to do anything...she just sits there all day...why can’t I get her to do anything?” I believe that it is important for a caregiver to give the person they are caring for as many options as possible, then live with what they choose. Too often the caregiver wears themselves out feeling that the person they are caring for wants and needs to stay active/busy all the time. Sometimes they might just want to sit still and contemplate. This does not preclude suggesting that staying active is healthy, but being active doesn’t have to be all consuming.

MAKE LEMONADE OUT OF LEMONS

None of us look into our futures and see ourselves as being dependent on another. We dream of independence and dread the thought of anything else. When we lose our dependence then problems arise. We can decide to make those problems into challenges and face them or we can continually hit our heads against a brick wall and say “poor me.” Your life can never be the same as it was before you needed care, but your capacity to be cared for and to be loved is still yours to choose and to treasure.

***Pat Baker’s** career in the field of aging spans over 45 years in both the private and public sector. Most of her career has been directing government programs funded under the Older Americans Act in Texas, Oklahoma and Georgia. She served as a lay leader of older adult ministry in Texas in the 80’s. She is currently the Director of Older Adult and Caregiver Ministries at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Tucker, GA. Pat has been involved with POAMN since its inception in various leadership roles.*