



## **Respecting A Senior's Independence**

By Linda Ziac  
The Caregiver Resource Center  
[www.CaregiverResourceCenter.com](http://www.CaregiverResourceCenter.com)

### **FINDING WAYS TO HELP WITHOUT BEING INTRUSIVE**

As a Board Certified Case Manager, a day doesn't go by that I don't have a conversation with someone who is concerned about their aging parent, spouse, family member, or friend.

Unfortunately, when we become concerned about another person, the tendency is for us to jump in to "fix things"; often creating a bull in the china shop scenario.

Thoughts of a loved one aging can be frightening, possibly surfacing as fears of the person developing Alzheimer's Disease, becoming wheelchair bound, or ending up in a nursing home.

### **DAY TO DAY CHALLENGES FOR SENIORS**

What many of us take for granted are the day to day tasks we do so easily, that seniors and people with special needs struggle with on a daily basis. This may be something as simple as threading a needle or opening a jar.

One of the images I have from my childhood is watching my mother struggle to thread a needle. I remember bragging about how easy it is to thread a needle.

What I didn't know at that time but I learned later first-hand, was that as we age, once simple tasks become much more difficult to accomplish.

I also clearly remember 20 years ago when my neighbor moved in. She was emptying some groceries from the trunk of her car, when I rushed over to help.

I stopped dead in my tracks when my neighbor said, "You can't do that. You need to let us do things for ourselves. We'll ask for help if we need it"

I then asked if I could help, and with a big smile she said "Of course you can help."

I've learned many valuable lessons from my neighbor who is now 100years old and still living next door. Over the past twenty years we've become good friends, and have had many conversations on the importance of finding a balance between helping a senior, and allowing the senior to maintain their independence and dignity.

## **SENIORS OFTEN SUFFER IN SILENCE**

All too often, a senior wants to retain their independence, and doesn't want to become a burden on their loved ones. In order to maintain their independence, the senior may attempt to hide the fact that they are struggling, and are in need of some assistance.

One way that you may learn of a problem, is when you receive a phone call in the middle of the night. When you answer the phone you hear "Your mother is in the emergency room, she's fallen and broken her hip." As the closest living relative you receive the call, and within minutes you are being faced new responsibilities as your mother's caregiver.

Not all problems occur as a crisis, but instead evolve in a gradual series of warning signs spanning weeks, months, or even years. You may notice that the senior is having difficulty cleaning the house, cooking meals, paying bills, or that you are finding yourself speaking louder so that you can be understood.

## **BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO**

A recurrent theme expressed, is the fear of broaching the subject of whether or not, a senior is capable of caring for themselves. In addition, once it's clear that the senior is in need of assistance, there is often confusion as to what is the best way to proceed.

This is a delicate balancing act, ensuring an senior's health and safety, while maintaining their independence and dignity.

It's only natural that when we become scared or concerned about a senior, our first impulse is to express our concerns, and immediately look to "fix" the problem. Unfortunately this can often make the situation worse.

Unless you are faced with an emergency that threatens the senior's safety or well-being, it's wise to take some time to gather information and properly assess the situation, prior to taking any action on your own..

## **SENIORS HAVE CONCERNS TOO**

It's important to note that seniors are also concerned about what they may encounter as they grow older.

In the most recent NCOA survey of senior concerns, it was found that older American's top concerns include:

- Remaining independent in my home (75%)
- Maintaining my physical health (40%)
- Fear of memory loss (35%)
- Maintaining my mental health (32%)

Source: NCOA (National Council on Aging) 2015

## **A MAGIC WAND**

It's common for a loved one to ask a senior what they need, or if they want help.

The usual response is "I don't need anything. I'm fine."

I acknowledge how important it is for us to support a person's independence and dignity.

At the same time, I share that although a senior may still be able to accomplish certain tasks on their own, perhaps they would enjoy a better quality of life, if they delegated some of these tasks.

**I ask the senior "If you had a magic wand what would you want to change in your life."**

***The responses I often hear often include:***

- I wish someone would drive me to the doctor's office. There are never any places to park.
- I wish someone would walk my dog. He pulls so hard on the leash, I'm afraid I'll fall.
- I wish someone would do my laundry. It's hard for me to carry the laundry basket up and down the stairs.
- I wish my eyesight was better. I have trouble using the phone.
- I wish my knees were stronger. I have trouble getting up and down from the toilet.
- I wish my children lived closer so I could read bedtime stories to my grandchildren.

All of these have very simple solutions, but if we aren't aware, we can't help make the senior's wishes come true.

Once I'm aware of the senior's wishes, I'm better able to work with the senior and their loved ones, to help make their wishes come true.

## **A GIFT FOR A SENIOR**

Loved ones often tell me that they feel frustrated and guilty when they try to help, but they're repeatedly told "I don't need anything."

One suggestion that I often make to loved ones, is that after learning a senior's wishes, it may be possible to give a gift to the senior for no special reason; or for a special occasion such as a birthday, mother's day, Christmas, or Chanukah.

These gifts can help improve a senior's quality of life in so many ways.

I recall one evening when we had a blackout.

I went next door to check on my neighbor, only to find her walking around in the dark, searching for her flashlight.

After the power was restored, I decided to do some research to find a way to help prevent my neighbor and my clients from a potential fall during a blackout.

I knew that office buildings have emergency lighting systems, and I found a very reasonably priced product for home use, that doesn't require any installation.

I purchased 2 emergency lights for my neighbor, which could be placed on an end table and plugged into a regular electrical outlet ; one for each floor of her home.

These emergency lights last up to an hour before needing to be recharged, and allow a senior or person with special needs time to move safely about their home, and get settled to wait out the black out.

I routinely suggest emergency lighting for all my clients.

## **SOME OTHER GIFT IDEAS**

**You may also want to consider one of the following:**

- Create a gift certificate for 6 rides to the doctor's office. If you don't live local, you can make arrangements for a substitute driver.
- Provide a senior with a tutorial on Facetime or Skype, so they can read bedtime stories to their grandchildren.
- Arrange for yourself or a person in the neighborhood to walk the senior's dog. Even one time would be a welcome relief.
- Provide a gift of a "cleaning person" to do a full house cleaning, including laundry. Even if this is a onetime gift, it would still be gratefully appreciated.
- Make a gift coupon book for a senior which includes a variety of services which you or a paid helper is willing to provide (e.g. cook a meal, grocery shop, pick up medication)
- Arrange for a home safety audit to identify any areas of concern in the senior's home, along with a corrective action plan.

## ***Assistive Devices***

Perhaps you may want to purchase an assistive device gift to help make the senior's life a little bit easier.

Some sample ideas include:

- Car Cane - an inexpensive small portable device that provides a senior leverage to lift themselves up and out of a car. (I keep a car cane in my car for those who need a little extra assistance.)
- Large Button Picture Memory Phones which allows the senior to see the picture of the person they want to call. One push on the picture button dials the call.
- Raised toilet seat with handles
- LifeLine – a medical alert system available with AutoAlert fall detection
- Arrange for a pharmacy to provide the senior with monthly pre-filled medication boxes and free delivery
- Replace regular door knobs with door knob levers

- Buy a shower seat
- Purchase a combination voice activated smoke detector and carbon monoxide detector.
- Provide small home fire extinguishers
- Replace the regular faucet with a lever faucet

## **PLANNING AHEAD**

As I shared earlier, you may now be faced with a delicate balancing act, ensuring a senior's health and safety, while maintaining their independence and dignity.

Effective communication is key to ensuring that a senior and their loved ones can talk openly about their feelings, needs, and wishes moving forward.

Once the senior has shared what they would like to see happen, and you have gathered information about available resources, you can now work together on creating a realistic plan of action. It's crucial to allow the senior a sense of influence and control regarding decisions affecting their future.

If the history of your relationship with the senior has been a difficult one, you may find it helpful to seek assistance from a professional (e.g. case manager, doctor, or therapist).

A professional can help you map out a viable strategy for moving forward.

Keep in mind that in order for there to be success moving forward, you will need cooperation and buy in from the senior.

## **A PERSONALIZED ACTION PLAN**

The Caregiver Resource Center's "Action Plan for Successful Aging" Program helps seniors and people with special needs take a proactive approach to addressing their current needs, while also planning and preparing for potential future challenges and crises.

Our successful aging strategies provide a wide range of services to meet the unique needs of the individual and their family. These strategies focus on health and mental health, case management and advocacy, home safety, transportation, and advance care planning to name a few.

### ***Some Benefits of Our Services***

- Well respected company serving the community since 1990
- All services are individually designed to meet the unique needs of the client and their family
- We are available 7 days a week by appointment, and 24/7 for emergencies
- Our services are provided onsite throughout the continuum of care

(Home, doctor's office, ER, hospital, short term rehab, assisted living, hospice, long term care facility.)

For more information please visit us at <http://www.caregiverresourcecenter.com>

Photo from Print Shop

*The information in this article is provided as an information resource only, and is not to be used or relied on for any diagnostic or treatment purposes. This information is not intended to be patient education, does not create any patient provider relationship, and should not be used as a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.*

*Please consult your health care provider for an appointment, before making any healthcare decisions or for guidance about a specific medical condition.*

---

*Linda Ziac is the owner and founder of The Caregiver Resource Center. The Caregiver Resource Center is a division of Employee Assistance Professionals, Inc. which Linda founded in October 1990. The Caregiver Resource Center provides a spectrum of concierge case management and advocacy services for seniors, people with special needs and families.*

*Linda's professional career spans more than 40 years in the health and mental health field as a CT Licensed Professional Counselor, CT Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor, Board Certified Employee Assistance Professional, Board Certified Case Manager, and Board Certified Dementia Practitioner. In addition, Ms. Ziac has 15 years of experience coordinating care for her own parents.*

*Linda assists seniors, people with special needs and their families; in planning for and implementing ways to allow for the greatest degree of health, safety, independence, and quality of life. Linda meets with individuals and family members to assess their needs, and develop a Care Team, while working with members of the Team to formulate a comprehensive Care Plan (a road map).*

*Once a plan is in place, Linda is available to serve as the point person to monitor and coordinate services, and revise the plan as needed. This role is similar to the conductor of an orchestra; ensuring that there is good communication, teamwork, and that everyone remains focused on the desired goal.*

<http://www.CaregiverResourceCenter.com>