

Elder Options, Inc.
Resource Library
Subject: Asking for Help

Admission of Age

The older woman was moving slower these days. “Thank goodness, I can still make it without a cane,” she said. “That will be the day when I have to use a cane, be unable to drive, and have to be dependent on someone. I wonder who will help me when I need it. Who will I ask when I have the courage to talk about my needs? It’s hard to admit the difficulties that come with growing older. We laugh when we can’t find our glasses but cannot see without them. We don’t drive at night as often because our night vision is not what it used to be. Standing for an extended period of time causes leg and back pain all of which reminds us that we’re no longer young.

At what point do we ask for help? Adult children busy with their own jobs, lives, and families seem to be oblivious to the needs of their gradually aging parents. Even living close by doesn’t always provide the solution of ready help. Of course, there is the necessary part of asking first. Can you help me? I cannot do this by myself anymore. We have to admit we cannot do it to ourselves. We’re not physically able to lift a couch, climb on the roof, split wood, drive across the state, understand complicated financial reports, etc. The stumbles, clumsy falls and the bruises we keep to ourselves. We didn’t break any bones. It was just an accident. No one else is the wiser except the aging body that continues to experience more aches and pains each day.

The two sides of this equation continue to spar about the future. If we don’t ask for help, our adult children assume we are independent and we are! They may be uncomfortable talking about “the will” or what our wishes are when we are really old. I wonder if that day (really old) will ever come in our minds. No one talks about it because it’s a problem that dances around the perimeter of the room, present but just a shadow, something to deal with in the future. No need to think about those things now!

But suddenly now is here. It usually comes in the form of a crisis. A car accident, a nasty fall with a broken bone, an acute health problem or the loss of a spouse can be the trigger. It can happen at 85. It can happen at 62. A person’s age can almost be irrelevant. The point is that there comes a time that help is needed in the form of a physical presence. It may be temporary. It may be for just a certain chore or when after cataract surgery, you need a ride home and someone to stay with you for several hours. The needs arise though and who will be there to help?

“My children are so busy. I just hate to ask them to take time off work. Perhaps, I’ll ask my neighbor,” states the older woman. Fortunately the neighbor is a friend, has the time, is healthy enough and the problem is solved...for the time being. Unfortunately, the neighbor is the same age as the woman and has aging problems of her own. Next time something arises, she may be in worse health and unable to help.

At some point there is finally a discussion of the older person needing help and needing a lot of it. The determination of how much help is needed may come from the adult children who now jump right in the middle of things. “Mom can no longer live by herself. We must get involved and take over.” Now this is Mom’s worse fear. She knows she needs help. She’s sure she doesn’t need as much as her adult children say and she certainly doesn’t want anyone, even her own grown up children taking over. But now, she’s finally asked for help and there’s no turning back. Decisions about where she’ll live, what she can afford, who she will live close to and how she’ll live the rest of her life are up for discussion. The discussion may include her but it will take a strong will and absolute determination to stand up to the family who has circled the wagons to decide what’s best. What should she do?

If she says, “No” to their suggestions and disagrees, the children will be upset. They know they are only trying to help. They have firm opinions and strong personalities. She’s seen as ungrateful that they’ve taken time off

work, come home and are willing to decide what's best for her. After all, everyone now recognizes that she's old. If she goes along with the plans whatever they are, changes are likely to be put in place without her agreement that will change her way of life. She may be moved out of her house. She may have meals delivered, someone in to clean, drive her to the store, and supervise her bathing. She may resent all of these intrusions particularly if she doesn't think she needs them or if they all come at once. After all, didn't she manage her life just fine up until now? She just needs a bit of help after all and would like to be part of the solution.

Adult children may find the solutions they think are best and then, as they must, go back to their jobs, their family, and in their opinion, the problem is solved. But is it? Unless their elder is satisfied with the changes, they may last only as long as it takes to fire the help and cancel the meals. Helping and making changes is a process that can work, can provide solutions, and can give the elder the care and assistance she needs. It needs to be done with a respectful discussion of what help is needed, what she wants to have done and her thoughts about how to do it. What she may want and what she may need may be miles apart but listening before making lots of changes assures the greatest degree of success.

In many cases the suggestion to move may be included as the largest part of the solution. "If only you lived closer," the daughter states when they talk by phone. "I could help more. We could visit in person. You could see your grandchildren more." So after much thought, the elderly woman moves into a retirement apartment near her daughter. She doesn't know anyone in this new town, has to find a doctor, and misses her old friends and home that she lived in for over 35 years. The daughter still very busy with her own life that must now include her mother into her schedule. She finds she's running more than before and is taking time off work to take her mother to the doctor's, for lab tests and to get a new hearing aid. Was the move a good idea? It's too late now but the older woman and her daughter think about how it could have been different.

What would have happened if the woman stayed in her own home, the adult children came to visit as they were able to, helped her with chores when they were there, and assisted in arranging help with her consent. The woman would be able to stay in her own home, remain close to her long-time friends, continue to attend community and church events, keep her doctor, and would have help to support her independence. Her children would know she was safe with help. They would continue to call and visit as they were able. With her, they would oversee the maintenance of the home, help decide projects to be completed, and work with her to make sure her home and she was safe and secure. From time to time visits would be arranged at their homes for the woman who would stay a few days and then return to her own home.

"I love you but I don't want to move," mother says to her daughter.

"I love you, Mom and I want you to be happy and safe. It bothers me to see you getting older. If you want to stay home, can we talk about what I can do to help you make your day a little easier?" says the daughter. "How can I help?" The conversation continues...

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