

## **Elder Options, Inc.**

### **Resources Library**

*Subject: Understanding*

### ***Respectful Understanding***

The doctor's office was full when we arrived. I made sure there were two seats next to one another so we could visit while my companion waited to be called in. I had driven the 86 year old woman to an eye doctor's appointment. As we sat there and waited for her turn, she remarked how everyone in the room was old and in a few years "they'd all be gone". As I looked around, all the people in the room looked 75 years old or older. They all seemed to have difficulties getting out of the chairs and walking into see the doctor. They didn't respond the first time when their name was called and sometimes had difficulty understanding instructions. Several seemed disoriented in how to leave the office, who to pay or if to pay. In all honesty, it seemed to me that it wasn't all the patients' fault either.

So for the next few weeks as an unofficial project, I decided to pay attention to people's interaction with adults much older than themselves at places such as the doctor's office, grocery store, post office, fast food restaurant, gas station, pharmacy and our own organization that interact with many older adults and their families. The survey wasn't completely for professional purposes since I was curious as an over age 60 adult how it affected me too. The results were interesting.

I found that when people are waiting on others, they talk too fast. Listen to the grocery clerk as they give you their beginning spiel and the bagger asks "paper or plastic" or the pharmacist who is rapidly giving instructions on new medication. With background noise, other people talking or the beep of the scanner, hearing what's being said or asked can be difficult.

Many times the person waiting on the older person looks down when they are talking. They may be looking at an appointment book, the computer or elsewhere but they do not look at the person they are talking to. Even though not everyone over the age of 60 wears a hearing aid, many of us read lips without realizing or admitting it. If you cannot see the person's face or mouth, it makes hearing and understanding harder.

I know that working a low paying, boring job may not be the person's dream job but when that attitude shows in serving the older adult, the older person may take it personally. After all, where would many of these younger employees be without the increasing numbers of elders who make appointments, drive cars that need gas or buy their groceries at that very same market?

When asking a question regarding a person's health whether it's for a health questionnaire or to pass the time of day, listen to and look at the person. Note body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. Be interested or don't ask.

Older people in general are concerned about cost. They want to make sure services are paid for. They may not understand a change in their health insurance that now requires a co-pay. They may be unfamiliar with the term, "co-pay" particularly if they've never had one before. Taking a minute to slowly explain the terminology, the billing policy or the grocery store rebate will gain a loyal customer or client.

In watching people interact with elders, I sensed a level of impatience. You could almost hear the conversation inside the person's head. "Can't this old lady hurry up? Doesn't she see everyone else in line? I'm glad I'm not old!" The older person probably is slower, more deliberate, hard of hearing, and need more explanation about every day things that are common terms to others.

By 2040 people over age 85 is expected to more than triple from approximately 4 million to about 14 million. In fact in 34 years, many of today's service providers will be considered "seniors" themselves. It is estimated by 2050 there may be 1 million centenarians. California has 3.7 million people who are 65 years and older. In less than 15 years this number will almost double to 6.3 million, a number which outpaces the national average.

The numbers are more than significant. The over 85 age group is the fastest growing segment in all of society. Consequently, it only makes sense to establish some basic but important guidelines when interacting with elders:

- Speak clearly, slowly and face the person.
- When the elder is speaking to you, look at him/her. Really listen and give them feedback so they'll know you are listening.
- When giving instructions or asking questions, simplify so understanding is easy.
- Understand that words or terms you hear and use 100 times a day may be foreign to the elder. For example: They may have taken shorthand at 100 words a minute but never used a computer.
- They aren't acting this way just to annoy you. They may have had hip surgery or a stroke which makes it difficult to get in/out of a chair or walk quickly. They may be the 1 out of 4 over 80 years who has some memory difficulty. He may also be the 85 year old who was up all night with his 83 year old wife with Alzheimer's disease.

Remember and respect. One day in the future it will be you who is moving slower, wearing a hearing aid or walking with a walker. As we all live longer, there will one day soon be a lot more elders and one of them if you live long enough, will be you. Treat the older people you come in contact with as if they were favorite grandparents or your special 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher you've not seen for years. After all, these people are ahead of us on the path that we hope to take following them. They deserve respectful understanding. Can we not give it to them?

*Carol S. Heape, MSW, CMC is Executive Director of Elder Options, Inc., Placerville and South Lake Tahoe, CA. and a regular columnist.*

Eochpv81805