

When Seniors Try the Patience of their Adult Children (and Vice Versa)

As an adult helping to care for your elderly parents, you may find they resist your most reasoned and sensible advice. They may seem downright stubborn for no particular reason. For example, perhaps your father neglects to pay bills on time. But when you suggest setting up an online bill paying system, he adamantly refuses. Or maybe your mother has trouble hearing, but flies off the handle whenever you suggest she get a hearing aid.

If these scenarios sound familiar, you are not alone. Seventy-seven percent of the adult children queried for a study published by Oxford University Press said their parents acted stubbornly at least some of the time. The study's authors identified the seniors' behaviors as "insisting, resisting, or persisting in their ways or opinions."

But just as adult children bump up against what we perceive as stubborn and exasperating behaviors, our parents likely feel bullied, patronized, or disregarded.

As David Solie, author of *How to Say It to Seniors: Closing the Communication Gap With Our Elders*, put it, "There's a gap in our language. It's as though we're speaking two different dialects."

He believes adult children and their parents have different life goals, which lead to different communication styles. Drawing upon the theories of the psychologist Erik Erikson, Solie posits that individuals go through specific developmental stages over the course of their lives. Each stage involves certain involuntary, subconscious, and all-consuming tasks. Solie identifies the two crucial tasks for seniors as preserving control and creating a legacy.

Preserving Control

The first task involves "preserving control in a world where control is being lost," Solie says. As their health declines, seniors face a loss of strength and mobility. They lose family members and friends. As they give up things



like their car or their house, they lose independence and status.

When children give their parents advice, tell them what to do or make decisions for them, they unwittingly undercut their parents' need to maintain as much control as possible. Parents may feel that accepting even a minimal amount of help is the first step toward losing their own autonomy.

"Even though you may be medically correct or financially correct, if you approach them in the wrong way, they will say no to you and your best ideas," Solie says.

He speaks from personal experience. After his father passed away, Solie wanted his mother, then 74 years old, to change residences and consolidate finances.

"It blew up," he said. "My rational, good, practical, money-saving proposals all were irrelevant to her need to be in control."

Once he realized how he was undermining his mother's need for control, he was able to reconcile with her.

"When we are talking with older adults, we need to make sure they have the full understanding of their choices," he said. Taking this approach makes parents and their children into partners rather than adversaries.

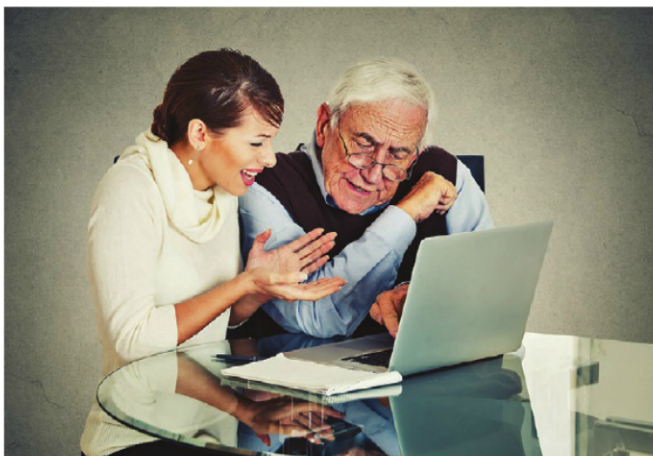
Solie gives the example of siblings who asked him to help them deal with their elderly mother, who had walking problems but didn't want to use a walker. He sat down with her and pointed out how failing to use the walker would give her short-term control, but might hinder her larger goal of long-term control. He explained how falling could jeopardize her ability to stay in her house and her neighborhood and remain active. She seemed resistant to his advice, and Solie left thinking that he had failed to reach her. But, three weeks later, she was using the walker.

"Add more choice and be patient with the choice, and I think you'll see a different response," he says.

Life Review

The second life task involves reviewing one's life and creating a legacy. At this stage in life, seniors are asking themselves "... a series of questions about who they are and what their life meant," Solie says. "They may not be overtly asking these questions, but subconsciously... they're trying to sort out how they made a difference and how they will be remembered."

Picture an adult child trying to talk to his mother about assisted living options. His mother keeps telling stories about the house – when she first moved in, when she brought her children home from the hospital, how her husband built the patio deck. The mother is engaged in life review while the son, in a hurry and anxious to get to his next task, gets exasperated by his mother's non-linear conversation.



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Solie advises setting aside adequate time to have these discussions. Expecting the conversation to take lots of detours will lessen the frustration when this inevitably happens.

In addition, he urges adult children to ask open-ended questions that invite their parents to engage in the life review process. He suggests using phrases that start with the words, "Tell me," "how," or "what" to spur stories and recollections.

"If you have patience with older adults, sit down with them and have a conversation – for example, asking them about their childhood...you can transform that person before your very eyes," Solie says. "I think the ability to provoke or invite life review is the greatest gift you can have with an older adult. It can be extremely therapeutic, redemptive, and meaningful to both generations."

Keeping in mind that older adults have control and legacy tasks to accomplish can help their adult children unlock the code that explains their parents' seemingly exasperating behavior. It won't entirely eliminate frustrations, but it can illuminate why parents have such a different communication style. And the adult child will also benefit.

"We enrich ourselves by walking that journey with them," Solie says. "We're deeply better for it."



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