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Creating Meaningful Conversations with Older Adults

*An Orange Paper from Mather LifeWays
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Creating Meaningful Conversations with Older Adults

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There is a familiar scene that often plays out at restaurants. It involves a middle-aged son or daughter who has just sat down to eat with their older adult mother or father. Inevitably, as the food arrives, an uncomfortable tension erupts and often overflows into an argument between the pair. Maybe it's over the soup being too hot or the fact that the parent doesn't like the chicken their adult child has picked out for them. Or, it could be that the mother or father is having a hard time hearing the son or daughter's questions about the menu and asks them to speak up. Whatever the argument may be about on the surface, the underlying issues are often patience and control.

It's the volatile give and take of these two essential factors that often leads to conflict in an otherwise close relationship. The adult child, most likely battling an emotional and stressful toll from caregiving duties, may try to quicken up their parent's decisions by making choices for them. This in turn upsets the adult parent who righteously feels capable of making their own decisions. Even though they may be slower to respond now, older adults have decades of knowledge they would like acknowledged.

The restaurant scene is the perfect example of a conversational cycle that plays itself out over and over again. It may not be easy, but creating a normal adult experience can lead to meaningful conversation about worthwhile issues like world events or family memories that make the older adult feel like they are contributing.

PATIENCE AND CONTROL ARE KEY

One recent example of success, again in a restaurant, included a daughter who had treated her hearing- and vision-impaired mother to lunch. As the food arrived, the daughter informed her mother of what was available for her on the table and asked her what she wanted to eat first, keeping her mother's preferences in mind and adhering to her choices without criticism. With both women respecting each other's role in the relationship, they were able to then focus the conversation not on food, but on a recent trip the daughter had taken to Europe.

An important case for creating meaningful conversation includes older adults suffering from various forms of dementia. Many times, the mistake is often made in trying to reorient the older adult into our reality when, in fact, the issue is more about validating or relieving the reality they are experiencing. Although the facts may be wrong, there remains an emotional component that is important and needs to be recognized.

Creating Meaningful Conversations with Older Adults

The best practice is to use creative thinking to alleviate their stress. For example, an older woman who recently fretted to her daughter that she needed to buy shoes for her mother was calmed by the response, “It’s okay, I’ve already bought them for her,” instead of her daughter berating her by saying, “remember, mom’s not around anymore.”

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DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS

Older adults have a need like all of us to tell their stories and simply require the right outlet and someone to listen. A successful recent example involved an assisted living community that offered monthly discussion groups for their residents, and later, decided to open the topic to the 2008 Presidential election. It was a thriving debate that let each participant offer their opinion in an atmosphere that promoted different viewpoints and allowed the older adults to acknowledge their adulthood. Simply put, they felt they had something to say. The result could have been different if the residence overlooked the idea for fear of controversy and instead, resorted to such happy topics of love and friendship.

A second best practice is to make a concerted effort to spend quality time together which can help reestablish your bond and create new history. Plan ahead with a list of favorite activities and let the older adult choose among them. For example, plan to bake a cake and let mom choose her favorite flavor. Or, take dad to a game and let him choose which sport.

By letting the older adult be the expert, you provide them with the feeling of competency and validation for their life experience. And if they feel more a part of the decision-making process, it’s more likely your dining experience will end not with hurt feelings, but plans for a next time.



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Mather LifeWays is a unique nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well.SM For more information about our senior living residences, Community Initiatives, or award-winning research, please visit our website at www.matherlifeways.com or call (847) 492.7500.