

## AGING WELL

# Respect, patience keep conversations enjoyable

By MARY ROMAN, LCSW

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.

### Volatile moments

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 parents' decisions by making choices for them.

This in turn upsets adult parents who rightfully feels capable of making their own decisions. Even though they may be slower to respond now, older adults have decades of life they would like acknowledged.

The restaurant scene is the perfect example of a conversational cycle that plays itself 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 he or she is contributing.

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### Patience is 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.

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 OK, I've already bought them for her," instead of her daughter berating her by saying, "remember, mom's not around anymore."

### 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 its residents, and in October, decided to open the topic to the 2008 Presidential election. A lively debate let each participant offer an opinion in an atmosphere that promoted different viewpoints and allowed the older adults to acknowledge their adulthood.

A second best practice is to also make a concerted effort to spend

quality time together. This 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 them be the experts, 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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