



Mather LifeWays Orange Papers are provided as a resource on topics related to the growing fields of aging, wellness, and workforce development. Their content reflects the expertise of

Mather LifeWays researchers, educators, and other professionals who are leaders in creating Ways to Age Well.SM

Creating Meaningful Conversations with Older Adults

Brought to you by Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging

Creating Meaningful Conversations with Older Adults

Like all of us, older adults have a need to tell their stories. They just simply require the right outlet and someone to listen.

The adult child—most likely battling emotional and physical stress from caregiving duties—may try to hurry their parent’s decisions by making choices for them. This, in turn, upsets the parent who righteously feels capable of making their own decisions.

Here’s a familiar scene: a middle-aged son or daughter have just sat down to eat at a restaurant with their older adult mother or father. Inevitably, as the food arrives, an uncomfortable tension erupts and 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 meal their adult child has picked out for them. Or maybe the parent is having a hard time hearing the son or daughter’s questions about the menu. Whatever the argument may be about on the surface, the underlying issues are often patience and control.

The volatility that arises from these types of incidents often leads to conflict in an otherwise close relationship. The adult child—most likely battling emotional and physical stress from caregiving duties—may try to hurry their parent’s decisions by making choices for them. This, in turn, upsets the 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 a 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 such as world events or family memories that make the older adult feel like they are contributing.

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.

Creating meaningful conversation with older adults is especially relevant with those who suffer 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 frets to her daughter that she needs to buy shoes for *her* mother can be calmed by the daughter’s response: “It’s okay, I’ve already bought them for her,” instead of, “You keep forgetting your mother isn’t around anymore!”

Creating Meaningful Conversations with Older Adults

In addition to allowing older adults to share stories, as an adult child of an older adult, try to make a concerted effort to spend quality time together. This can help reestablish your bond and create new history.

Like all of us, older adults have a need to tell their stories. They just simply require the right outlet and someone to listen. A great example of a successful forum for telling stories and sharing opinions 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.

In addition to allowing older adults to share stories, as an adult child of an older adult, try to 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 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.

***Mather LifeWays** is a unique nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well.SM Learn more about our award-winning research at Mather LifeWays **Institute on Aging**, our **senior living residences**, and our **community initiatives**.*

www.matherlifeways.com | (847) 492.7500