

Service Learning Project

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Introduction

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVYtkgTyd0g>

This is the stereotype of our elderly. We love our elderly and will speak about our communication with them. We are credible because we have grandparents that we communicate with, we have spent several hours interacting with elderly, and we have researched the subject. You will want to pay attention because you all at some point will interact with elderly, and will some day be old and possibly senile. We will first talk about some barriers of communication between the elderly and the younger generations, then about common communication techniques used by the elderly, and we will end with what we can do to improve our communication with our elderly.

Elderly Communication and Younger Generations

First we will talk about the barriers of communication between the elderly and the younger generations.

Cultural stereotypes of elderly people makes for a stumbling block for effective conversation. It is true that as we age our bodies decay and begin to fail, but this does not imply that the majority have their mental capacity hindered. In fact, at the Skyline rest home there are twenty-four residents and only six of them have any sort of mental impairment like Alzheimer's disease. Regardless of this fact many times a younger generation will use "elderspeak" when communicating with an elder. "Elderspeak" is akin to baby talk; as in we speak slower, simplify our speech, exaggerate words, use statements that sound like questions, use a limited vocabulary, etc..., just as we would talk to a child (Simpson). According to research, elderly people are very often offended to be treated like a little child. According to Angela, a CNA that works at Skyline, they want to be respected; and making them feel incompetent does not accomplish this (Nusbaum). "Elderspeak" has been found by research to cause more confusion, self-doubt, reinforce negative stereotypes, and even erode the self-esteem of the elderly (Simpson).

There are some very real barriers however, when we consider the physical condition some of the elderly are in. Sally, one of the residents, suffered from a stroke recently and her ability to speak is limited. Suffering from the side effects from such an ordeal, she is slower to respond, and struggles to make sense of people's words that are not familiar to her. Despite this, I sensed that she is very much alert and witty though she struggles to form her responses in a quick manner. Using "elderspeak" in her situation would probably insult her.

Angela believes that the biggest barrier is that young people are very self-centered, and don't listen. Elderly people may use subtle cues to communicate a different meaning, and young people are not as accustomed to recognizing those cues

Elderly people typically have very different interests than younger people do. They tend to value the emotional aspects in life, more specifically related to family. Younger people enjoy speaking about business, college, careers, technology, and relationships. This creates a barrier between the two parties because neither one can relate to the other or even have the desire to. My grandmother mostly enjoys conversing about family matters, rather than current events. She has ten children, so I have a large family that easily keeps her company. Most of the time, my aunts and uncles talk to her about things that have happened within the immediate and sometimes extended family.

Also, because of the generation gap, the younger generation cannot completely relate to the childhood experiences of the elderly. The lifestyles of today are so different than that of thirty, forty, or more years ago. Everything has changed, from entertainment and news to hobbies and pastimes. Norman, a resident at skyline, often relates back to his experiences in the navy. Norman worked aboard an aircraft carrier and has many stories to tell about it. While at skyline, I have noticed that many visitors are not able to relate to his stories of the Navy. Although I have never been aboard an aircraft carrier, I can partially relate to Norman's experiences through a computer game, battlefield 2. In this game, I have played many roles as a navy seal, occasionally dealing with aircraft carriers. However, I was reluctant to relate the game to Norman's experiences because I did not know his understanding or opinion on computer technology and computer games.

Elderly Communication Techniques

Secondly, we will talk about common communication techniques used by the elderly. When asked if physical limitations would impede non-verbal communication factors like body movement or time, Angela responded that "if they wanted to express themselves, they would." She also said that the only time when the expression would be limited is if the appendage was completely incapacitated or a serious malady is the factor. In general, however, our elderly are just about as capable to communicate as we are. Angela said that the residents that liked touch were happier than those that did not, though health levels might be the same. One of the cheerful residents one day saw a cute guy visiting and slapped his butt as she asked: "how you doing hun?" and then left. "in old age, the tactile hunger is more powerful than ever, for it is the only sensuous experience there remains to him. It is at this time, when he has again become so dependent upon others for human support, that he is in need of embraces, of an arm around his shoulder, of being taken by the hand, caressed, and given the opportunity to respond."

Elderly Communication Helpful Tips

Finally, we will talk about what we can do to improve our communication with our elderly. A tactic we can use is to come prepared with pre-selected questions to start a conversation, build trust and eventually an intimate relationship which will lead to self-disclosure. According to Joy Simpson, we can also simplify what we say into explicit statements, repeat and paraphrase if needed, and all this while remembering to not patronize them using "elderspeak."

Our elderly might be old but are human nonetheless and want to be loved, needed and respected. One of the main things we can do is listen. Angela related how many of them have rich pasts full of history and inspiring stories. One of the residents' husband died when he was thirty. She raised six children while working and accomplishing great things like becoming the president of the "Utah Daughters of Pioneers" organization, writing poems and compiling a lot of history, among many other accomplishments. Angela described her as a "wealth of information." So as we put aside our selfishness and take the time to listen to our predecessors we can tap into a mental goldmine. I remember listening to my grandfather tell me stories every night as a child. Those memories are some of the best that I have from my childhood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are real barriers when communicating with the elderly, however there are also a lot of stereotypes that need to be overcome; especially avoiding “elderspeak.” The communication style of the elderly is very similar to our own though some physical limitations can be a problem. We also spoke of several little things that we can do to improve our communication with them, including listening. Lets improve our communication with our elders so we can teach our children those principles. That way when we are senile and stuck in a rest home we will have an easier time retaining our dignity; and help our current old folk do so as well.

References

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