

A Letter from Home

A NEWSLETTER FOR CAREGIVERS

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PUTTING YOURSELF IN ANOTHER'S SHOES

An anonymous poem that has been floating around in cyberspace for years paints a portrait of an old “crabby” man who has a lot on his mind and serves as a reminder to all caregivers that we all desire to be treated with respect and dignity.

As the story goes, when an old man died in the geriatric ward of a nursing home in North Platte, Nebraska, it was believed that he had nothing left of any value.

Later, when the nurses were going through his meager possessions, they found this poem. Its quality and content so impressed the staff that copies were made and distributed to every

nurse in the hospital. One nurse took her copy to Missouri. The old man's sole bequest to posterity has since appeared in the Christmas edition of

the News Magazine of the St. Louis Association for Mental Health. And this little old man, with nothing left to give to the world, is now the author of this ‘anonymous’

poem winging across the Internet.

Remember this poem when you next meet an older person who you might brush aside without looking at the young soul within.

One day, we will all be there too!



Crabby Old Man

What do you see nurses? What do you see?
What are you thinking when you're looking at me?
A crabby old man not very wise,
Uncertain of habit with faraway eyes?

Who dribbles his food and makes no reply,
When you say in a loud voice 'I do wish you'd try!'
Who seems not to notice the things that you do,
And forever is losing A sock or shoe?

Who, resisting or not lets you do as you will,
With bathing and feeding The long day to fill?
Is that what you're thinking? Is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, nurse you're not looking at me.

I'll tell you who I am As I sit here so still,
As I do at your bidding, as I eat at your will,
I'm a small child of Ten with a father and mother,
Brothers and sisters who love one another.

A young boy of Sixteen with wings on his feet,
Dreaming that soon now a lover he'll meet,
A groom soon at Twenty my heart gives a leap,
Remembering, the vows that I promised to keep.

At Twenty-Five, now I have young of my own,
Who need me to guide And a secure happy home,
A man of Thirty My young now grown fast,
Bound to each other With ties that should last.

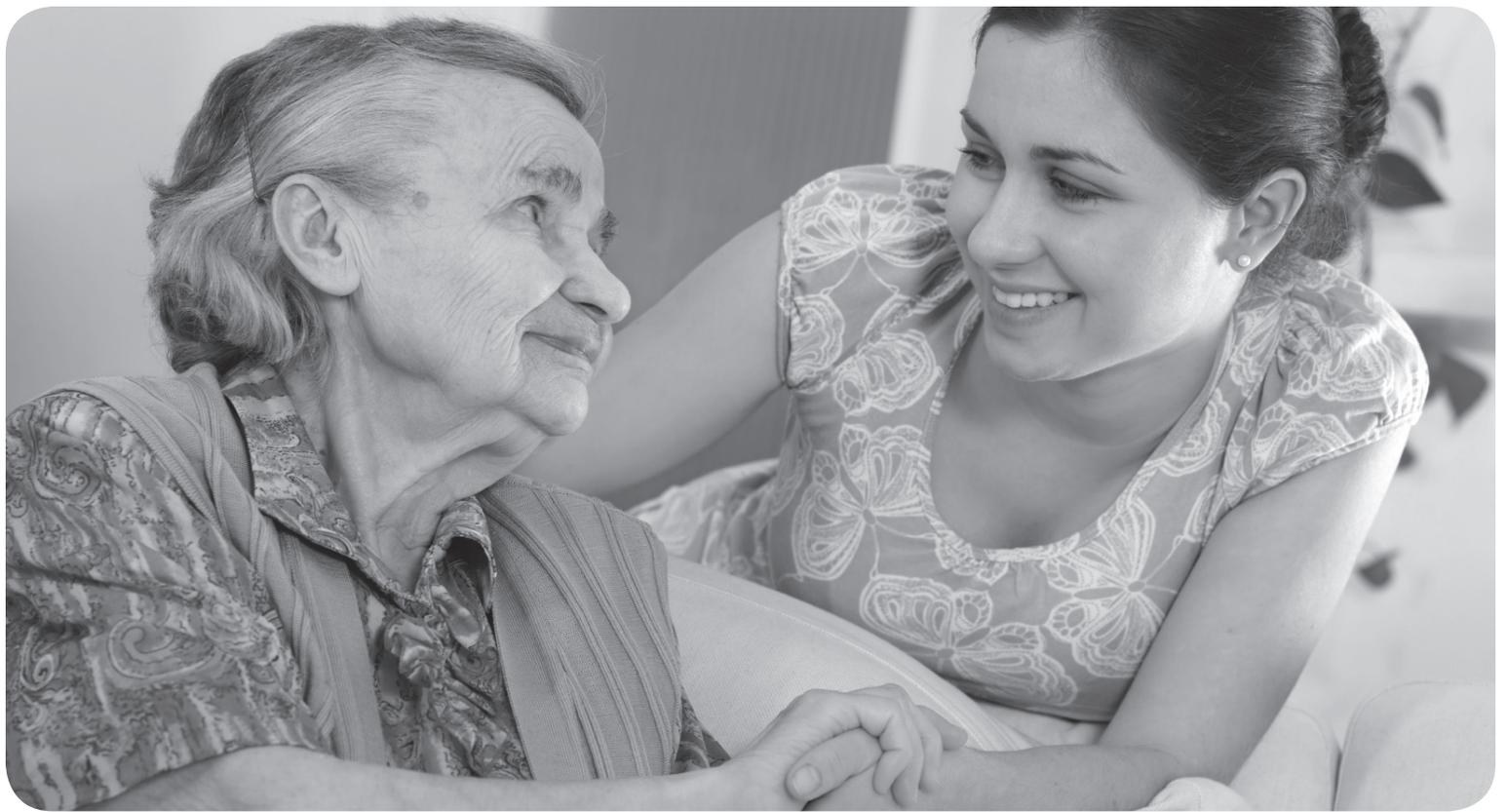
At Forty, my young sons have grown and are gone,
But my woman's beside me to see I don't mourn,
At Fifty, once more, babies play 'round my knee,
Again, we know children My loved one and me.

Dark days are upon me my wife is now dead,
I look at the future shudder with dread,
For my young are all rearing young of their own,
And I think of the years and the love that I've known

I'm now an old man and nature is cruel,
Tis jest to make old age look like a fool,
The body, it crumbles grace and vigor, depart,
There is now a stone where I once had a heart.

But inside this old carcass a young guy still dwells,
And now and again my battered heart swells,
I remember the joys I remember the pain,
And I'm loving and living life over again.

I think of the years, all too few gone too fast,
And accept the stark fact that nothing can last,
So open your eyes, people open and see,
Not a crabby old man ... Look closer ... see ME!!



EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH CLIENTS

Effective communication with our clients is critical to providing appropriate care. The “Crabby Old Man” poem demonstrates that the way we interact with clients can have a profound effect on them and how they perceive their care. It is easy to get caught up with the many daily tasks we must complete for our clients. However, we must never lose sight of the compassion and dignity that we can provide to our clients with each and every interaction.

The elderly are stereotyped in the media and in greeting cards as grumpy, senile, frail, or child-like. Because these images surround us constantly, it is easy to see how we are programmed to interact with the elderly differently than those who may be younger. Often times, caregivers may unknowingly communicate with the elderly in a way that may be perceived by the older person as disrespectful or demeaning.

Have you ever observed a caregiver saying something like, “Alright, sweetie, let’s get you out of that bed”? This type of communication style with the elderly is called Elderspeak. Researchers found that as many as 40% of the caregivers in home care and nursing homes use speech which the elderly perceive as demeaning. Elderspeak is when you address the elderly:

- In a sing-song exaggerated manner.
- Speak in a high pitch tone.
- Use overly familiar terms such as “dear”, “sugar”, “sweetie”, “honey”, “silly guy”.
- Phrase statements like questions, such as, “That is not the way to the bathroom now, is it?”
- Shorten sentences, much as you would with a child.
- Use “we” instead of “you”, such as, “Are we ready for our bath?”
- Using child-like references for words, such as, “potty”, “tinkle”, “night-night”.
- Using overly bossy or demanding talk that does not recognize the client’s abilities, such as, “You need to eat your lunch”.

These often patronizing interactions have been shown to have negative long-term effects on the elderly. Some of these are:

- Using this type of language can make the person feel like they cannot make decisions on their own. It decreases client's self-esteem.
- It can create the feeling that the person is incompetent. Many elders say this type of language makes them feel inferior. Becky Levy, a Yale University Professor of Epidemiology and Psychology, found in her research that perceiving oneself as incompetent, or cognitively impaired actually leads to lower cognitive functioning.
- Speaking in sing-song or higher pitches can create greater distortion and trouble hearing what is being said. The ability to hear higher pitches diminishes with age.
- It can be more confusing for the elderly when others speak more slowly and exaggerate their words. Talking too slowly can lessen the elderly person's ability to focus on the main point.
- Confusion can result when statements are presented as questions.
- In a research article published in *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias* (2008), it was discovered that nursing home residents with dementia are significantly more likely to become disruptive and resistive to caregivers with those who used elderspeak. One can make the assumption that this result may also be seen by caregivers in the home setting. This study suggests that a simple change in communication can have a positive effect on dementia clients.

To overcome elderspeak:

- Don't assume the older person can't hear. Don't speak louder or slower.
- Talk to older clients normally, not like a child.
- Do not use questions as statements
- Use the client's given name. Do not use overly familiar terms, such as sweetie.
- Do not speak to a client like they are not intelligent.
- Really pay attention to your conversations with older adults. Elderspeak is generally a habit and it must be a conscious decision to change.
- Remember to show clients the patience and love that we would want to receive, should the roles be reversed.

Resources:

Williams, K., Kemper, S., & Humbert, M.L. (2004) Enhancing Communication With Older Adults: Overcoming Elderspeak. *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 30(10).

Williams KN, Herman R, Gajewski B, and Wilson K. (2008) Elderspeak Communication: Impact on Dementia Care. *Am. Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias*.



Interestingly enough, researchers found that elderly persons do not use elderspeak to speak to each other, even when they are in caregiving roles.



Researchers found that those who have a positive attitude towards aging live an average of 7 ½ years longer than those who don't.