



FEATURE ARTICLE FROM ALWAYS BEST CARE

Healthy Aging: What role does socialization play?

by David J. Caesar

Educating care providers and informing families currently caring for loved ones is one way Always Best Care Senior Services is ensuring homebound seniors are receiving the quality care they deserve. With this in mind, Ryan Engar, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker for Always Best Care, teamed up with Fran Wilby, PhD, Assistant Professor, Executive Director of the W.D. Goodwill Initiatives on Aging, and O. William Farley PhD, Professor at the College of Social Work, University of Utah, to write an article and training guidelines for Always Best Care Senior Services care providers and family members on the importance of socialization.

The aging population, nationally and worldwide, is at the forefront of people's thoughts today. Developed nations worldwide are experiencing an "aging boom" as people are living longer. Nationally, estimates are that the number of people age 65 and older will grow to 80 million by the year 2050 with the fastest growing group being those 85 and older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

With increased longevity comes increased number of years in retirement. As the demographics of our nation shift, family members caring for their aging loved ones will no longer be enough help to adequately care for our senior population. More and more families will begin to invite caring professionals into their homes for assistance. It is for this reason Always Best Care Senior Services exists. For the past 14 years Always Best Care has been welcomed in many homes in an effort to improve not only the quality of life of the individual receiving the care but the quality of life of the family members as well. By the year 2040, people who live until 65 years old can expect to live an additional 15 to 20 years—thus spending 21% to 23% of their total life span in retirement (Smeeding, 2010). If these numbers seem astounding, it is even more astounding to wonder what people will do with this time.

With retirement comes withdrawal from normal work cycles and work relationships. Although many older adults handle the transition from work to retirement well, others experience emotional difficulties during this phase of life. The loss of contact with close colleagues and the loss of a sense of purpose in life can lead to increased social isolation and bouts of depression. Additionally the burden of chronic disease can make normal routines difficult and strain financial resources. So what roles does socialization play in maintaining health and wellness through retirement and beyond?

Socialization plays a large role in maintaining quality of life as one ages. Research has shown that those older adults, who have strong social networks, seem to have a higher quality of life, live longer, and are healthier compared to those with little social support (Glass, Mendes de

Leon, Marottolie & Berkman, 1999). Also, studies have shown that strong social support seems to protect against cognitive decline and self-reported disability (Mendes de Leon, Glass, & Berkman, 2003). The “use-it or lose it” theory seems to be true—social engagement may stimulate multiple body systems including the cognitive, cardiovascular, and neuromuscular systems.

Social engagement also seems to be an active coping strategy as well as reinforcing life long patterns of connections to other people and resources (Barnas, Pollina, & Cummings, 1991).

Given the importance of socialization to healthy aging—what happens to those older adults who do not have strong social networks and social support? Numerous factors can impact the social networks of older adults; smaller family sizes and the mobility of family members leaves many older adults isolated from family help and resources. Those older adults who live past 80 years old find that many of their friends and in some cases family members have passed away, leaving them more isolated and alone. Chronic disease can affect an older person’s ability to leave the home to engage in social activities. Limited transportation options for those who no longer drive can leave them isolated in their homes. It is in these cases that the many services of Always Best Care provide not only vital assistance to maintain their clients’ health and safety but also address problems caused by isolation. Always Best Care provides an opportunity for friends and family to reunite through transportation as well as an opportunity to socialize and form meaningful relationships with people who genuinely care for them within the walls of their own home.

As a society, we are poorly equipped to deliver help to older adults who are isolated in their homes. The creation of community-based programs is a dire need now and will become more essential as the aging population strains social programs. One such program, developed at the University of Utah College of Social Work by Wilford Goodwill and O. William Farley, is the Neighbors Helping Neighbors program (NHN). NHN is a non-profit organization whose mission is to improve the health, safety, and quality of life for community-dwelling seniors through the promotion and maintenance of independent living. NHN strives to enable older adults to reside in the community for as long as possible while training social work students and community volunteers.

In Utah, as well as in many other communities throughout the nation, caring individuals have responded to our aging population’s cry for help. In many cases it only takes a little help from an outside source to keep an older adult at home whether that outside source is a family member or a care provider from one of the many home-care agencies created to address such needs. In the growing number of cases where family member’s responsibilities pull them away from hands-on service to their loved ones, agencies such as Always Best Care are able to customize the amount of involvement they have in an individual’s life in an effort to maintain their quality of life. Remaining within the home where memories were formed, with a little assistance from a care provider, enables an older adult to remain in the community with dignity and without suffering from the consequences of social isolation. It is up to our society to step up and create the kind of services that will enable older adults to remain in their homes, without isolation, if that is what they choose.

References

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David J. Caesar is the Vice President of Franchise Operations at Always Best Care Senior Services. Through its network of more than 125 independently owned and operated franchises, Always Best Care provides non-medical in-home care, assisted living placement and skilled home health care for seniors across the country.



Always Best Care Senior Services

Always Best Care Senior Services (www.alwaysbestcare.com/) is based on the belief that having the right people for the right level of care means peace of mind for the client and family. Always Best Care Senior Services has assisted over 25,000 seniors, representing a wide range of illnesses and personal needs. This has established the company as one of the premier providers of in-home care, assisted living placement assistance, and skilled home health care.

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