The Empathizing Caregiver

- Offer Empathy towards the Senior Citizens

Aging is a natural process, which inevitably occurs in human life cycle. It brings with a host of challenges in the life of the elderly, which are mostly engineered by the changes in their body, mind, thought process and the living patterns. Ageing refers to a decline n the functional capacity of the organs of the human body, which occurs mostly due to physiological transformation, it never imply that everything has been finished. We live in a society where the post-World War II Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946-1964) is reaching their senior years in ever-growing numbers, and representing an increasingly larger segment of the population. Higher standards of living and medical advancements are extending life expectancies in many countries to well above the age of eighty.

Caring for, and having successful relationships with older adults often requires unique communication skills and strategies. The senior citizens constitute a precious reservoir of such human resource as is gifted with knowledge of various sorts, varied experiences and deep insights. May be they have formally retired, yet an overwhelming majority of them are physically fit and mentally alert. Hence, given an appropriate opportunity, they are in a position to make significant contribution to the socio-economic development of their nation.

Growing Population:

The population of the elderly persons has been increasing over the years. As per the UNESCO estimates, the number of the aged(60+) is likely to 590 million in 2005. The figure will double by 2025. By 2025, the world will have more elderly than young people and cross two billion mark by 2050. In India also, the population of elder persons has increased form nearly 2 crores in 1951 to 7.2 crores in 2001. In other words about 8% of the total population is above 60 years. The figure will cross 18 % mark by 2025.

The question of ageing was first debated at the United Nations in 1948 at the initiative of Argentina. The issue was again raised by Malta in 1969. In 1971 the General Assembly asked the Secretary-General to prepare a comprehensive report on the elderly and to suggest guideline for the national and international action. In 1978, Assembly decided to hold a World Conference on the Ageing. Accordingly, the World Assembly on Ageing was held in Vienna from July 26 to August 6, 1982 wherein an International Plan of Action on Ageing was adopted. The overall goal of the Plan was to strengthen the ability of individual countries to deal effectively with the ageing in their population, keeping in mind the special concerns and needs of the elderly. The Plan attempted to promote understanding of the social, economic and cultural implications of ageing and of related humanitarian and developed issues. The International Plan of Action on Ageing was adopted by the General Assembly in 1982 and the Assembly in subsequent years called on governments to continue to implement its principles and recommendations. The Assembly urged the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to ensure that follow-up action to the Plan is carried out effectively.

(i) In 1992, the U.N.General Assembly adopted the proclamation to observe the year 1999 as he International Year of the Older Persons.

(ii) The U.N.General Assembly has declared “Ist October” as the International Day for the Elderly, later rechristened as the International Day of the Older Persons.

(iii) The U.N.General Assembly on December 16, 1991 adopted 18 principles which are organized into 5 clusters, namely-independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment, and dignity of the older persons.

These principles provide a broad framework for action on ageing. Some of the Principles are as follows :

(i) Older Persons should have the opportunity to work and determine when to leave the work force.

(ii) Older Persons should remain integrated in society and participate actively in the formulation of policies which effect their well-being.

(iii) Older Persons should have access to health care to help them maintain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being.

(iv) Older Persons should be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential and have access to educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of society.

(v) Older Persons should be able to live in dignity and security and should be free from exploitation and mental and physical abuse.

The top ten concerns facing senior citizens today include:

Disease, physical aging, physical assistance, financial security, health care costs, loneliness, abuse or neglect, transportation, changing social climate etc

Health Care Costs – The older we get, the more healthcare we need. It is important to get screenings for disease and natural aging conditions to catch any health issues in their beginning stages. While doctor visits multiply, medical costs are rising, which can impact one’s retirement budget.

Disease – Alzheimer’s, dementia, cataracts, macular degeneration, and osteoporosis – these health issues and more threaten a person’s day-to-day functioning capabilities. We all know that health issues progress with age. It is important to learn more about coping with health issues before they happen in order to prepare mentally.

Physical Aging – Aging means that we cannot move as quickly as we used to. Our eyes don’t see as clearly and our bones weaken. Nutrition and exercise become all the more important as we age.

Physical Assistance – Getting groceries, going to doctor’s visits, even small tasks such as cleaning the house become more difficult as we get older and we may need to have daily assistance or a homecare provider. Finding good help can be a challenge. Using word of mouth is the best way to find compassionate help.

Financial Security – The rising cost of living while living on a fixed income poses new financial restrictions. We may not be able to afford the same comforts of life that we used to.

Loneliness – Getting older means that our friends are aging, as well. It is common for seniors to lose their friends to Alzheimer's disease or even death. Spending time with remaining friends and family members becomes all the more important. A pet can be wonderful for daily companionship, as well.

Financial Predators – Sadly, it is a fact that there are unscrupulous people looking to prey on senior citizens. They will try to sell unnecessary goods or services to those they see as vulnerable. Share your financial decisions with someone you trust. A financial advisor may be necessary, but most of us have at least one friend or family member willing to offer free advice.

Abuse or Neglect – Nursing homes and assisted living facilities struggle with under-staffing issues, which can lead to abuse or neglect of the residents. Be sure to find a place to live that comes highly recommended by people you trust.

Transportation – Our reflexes can slow as we age and our eyes can become less clear. This may lead us to give up driving for our safety and the safety of others. Thankfully, transportation is available specifically for those who need it, including seniors.

Changing social climate – Adjusting to technological changes is probably the largest social hurdle we can face as senior citizens. See your local library for free classes on using computers.

The definition of empathy is: The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.

In other words, empathy means being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes for a while so you can imagine what it is they are going through.

When caring for the elderly, it's important to have empathy as you assume your role as caregiver. Caring for our loved ones can be a rewarding experience, but it's also possible to feel stress, anger and get easily worn out from your caregiving duties.

Empathetic Caregiving Tips

When we are empathetic caregivers, we have the ability to understand what the person we are caring for is dealing with. By trying to see life from their point of view, you'll be able to better reflect on their thoughts and feelings. It's easy to get frustrated when the person you are caring for is grumpy, argumentative or demanding, but take a step back when it gets overwhelming.

Imagine that you are the one who is sick or in pain all the time. Imagine that you have no privacy and have to rely on someone else to help you accomplish the simplest tasks, like sitting up in bed or eating a meal. Picture yourself unable to remember the names of objects you've used every day of your life, or not recognizing your own family members. Chances are, if you mentally put yourself in the same situation your loved one is in, you'll be able to grasp why their mood or personality is the way it is.

The ability to have empathy is probably one of the most important (if not the most important overall) qualities in providing excellent caregiving to loved ones. Think about how you would like to be treated if you were dealing with the circumstances your loved one is in the midst of. Being able to empathize will lead to better caregiving and more compassion, as well as the ability to be patient and strong.

It’s more difficult to be kind and gentle when you can’t be an empathetic caregiver. For this reason, it’s also important to recognize that there’s no shame in asking for help from others when your caregiving job becomes simply too overwhelming. Taking a break every now and then whether through respite care services or enlisting the help of another family member or friend will allow you a chance to refresh so you can continue to be a compassionate caregiver.

By recognizing the feelings that are behind the behavior of your loved one, especially during difficult times, we can change our own reaction to their words or actions.