

## *Lessons I Learned in My Journey to Understand Seniors*

When I began working with older adults many years ago I was determined to help them figure out their future housing and care needs. I was going to be the best resource they ever had. But on my way to solving all their problems I had the rude awakening that I didn't begin to understand them, let alone their "problems." I had answers, but they weren't necessarily the answers my clients needed.

I knew senior communities, I understood assisted living and nursing homes. But I really didn't understand the journey an elder travels from living in their independent home to considering and moving to a senior community. I wasn't in touch with the emotions that a senior experiences when their health begins to fail, or when they have to stop driving, or when they're caring for their spouse and are faced with the reality that the ideal retirement they'd envisioned for the two of them would never be. And how could I? I'd never come close to facing the challenges they had. I was still looking to my future not reflecting upon my past. *Who reflects upon their past in their 20s and 30s?*

In addition to that revelation, I also began to realize that there was another whole path that the adult children travel as they balance their own family responsibilities along with caring for and worrying about their parents. That presented a whole new set of circumstances and another new puzzle I needed to find the pieces to. And once I had the pieces, I realized that each family had their own puzzle and they often looked very different from the next one. Some common threads for sure, but a lot of uniqueness.

Once I realized the complexity of each clients' challenges, their fears, their emotions (spoken and unspoken), I learned another crucial lesson. It's less about me giving them answers and more about guiding them to the right questions, allowing them to find "their own" answers. I found myself doing more asking than telling, and more listening than talking. The more I listened "intently" the more I heard not only what they were saying, but what they weren't saying. And that's where the gift in conversations lies.

Mistakes are incredibly valuable if you actually do something with what you learn. So I'm hopeful that by sharing my mistakes you may not have to make the same ones. Before you advise your loved ones on what they should do, ask a lot of questions and listen intently to their answers. Try to put yourself in their place and imagine what they're experiencing and feeling. Picture a suitcase sitting next to them containing a lifetime of experiences that has molded them into the person you love. And understand that their suitcase contains different items than yours does.

And seniors, recognize that your children have your best interests at heart, that they're trying to do what they believe is right by you. The more of your thoughts and concerns you share the more they'll be empowered to move in the direction that will best serve you.

Talk, but invest more of your effort in listening.

*This article is a reprint of a blog posted by  
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