

## **Keeping Seniors Busy**

For the last several decades, Ann has had no problem loading her dishwasher, washing her clothes or making her bed. No big deal, you know? That is until her widowed father moved in with Ann and her family. Now, her father follows her around and tells her just how things should be done. He does the same with Ann's husband, Jim, though Jim has found ways to out-fox the elder. For Ann – well, it's her dad, and she doesn't know how to handle it graciously.

However, it's beginning to drive her nuts. At first, the arrangement seemed perfect for everyone. After Ann's mother died, her dad knew he should sell the house. He didn't want to move to an apartment. He felt he had too much energy. Ann and Jim, even with their two teenagers, had plenty of room, and thought Ann's dad could help out around the house.

That's just the problem. He helps out too much. Ann's dad had owned his own business and had employees. He was very successful. Ann's mom used to complain that after he retired, he wanted to run the house, but it didn't seem too serious. Then, when Ann's mom got sick, her dad's energy went into caregiving. He was a wonderful caregiver all the way through.

At first, the move kept everyone busy, and the arrangement was new. But now, all of the "advice" is getting old. Ann's trying to be patient, but doesn't know what to do with her dad.

The first thing I suggested to Ann was to urge her dad to talk with the people at the hospice that cared for her dying mother. He would be a wonderful volunteer for them. Most hospice volunteers say they get more out of it than the people they help.

Hospice volunteers spend time with people who are sick and/or their families. They talk, play games, read or just listen. They generally form a close bond with the person they are caring for, under the guidance of hospice professionals. Talk

about a reason to get out of bed in the morning! And that's what Ann's dad needs. A reason to get out of bed in the morning.

He has retired from his successful business. His ill wife is gone. He is still healthy, but isn't fulfilled by his golf game and taking walks. He wants to make a difference. Therefore he's driving his family nuts.

What he needs is direction. Volunteering for hospice isn't, of course, for everyone. But there are so many other helpful things people can do. Many business people join SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives). These people mentor new business owners. SCORE volunteers have a lifetime of experience behind them. This would be another good choice for Ann's dad.

For an elder who is in good physical condition, Habitat for Humanity may be just the ticket. They can always use volunteers. Also, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program offers dozens, if not hundreds, of volunteer opportunities.

This is what I suggested to Ann. Her dad is healthy. He's not driving her nuts on purpose. He needs a purpose. As we talked, Ann was making a list of places to call. I reminded her, too, that nursing homes badly need volunteers, and the volunteers don't need to be extremely strong to be helpful. So as her father ages, there will be many things he can do. His feeling of self-worth will improve, and soon he won't have time to tell Ann what to do.

There's another problem that centers around our elders and activities. As elders decline physically and/or mentally, they often need to move to assisted living or a nursing home. These days, good care centers work hard to provide varied and meaningful activities for differing abilities and interests.

However, some elders, when they move to a care center, aren't willing to participate in provided activities. They'd rather sit in their room and complain about being bored. I'm often asked by frustrated adult children how to "get them to participate."

When my mother moved to a nursing home – one she was very familiar with, as my uncle and my dad were already living there – she could still use her phone, watch TV and do her crossword puzzles. I also kept her magazine and newspaper subscriptions up. However, except for the phone, nothing about what she did was social. She ate one meal a day with my dad, and had the other meals in her room.

When she moved into the home, she was having trouble with her feet. She had some memory problems, but her frequent falls were the reason she moved in the first place. She used her sore feet as a “reason” not to go to the dining room for her meals, and then, of course, she ate one meal with dad, so that was understandable (he couldn’t go to the main dining room).

Her feet got better, and her excuses not to get out of her room and do things got weaker. However, she just plain refused to socialize. Mom had always been a social person, so this was a change for her. I worried about depression, as perhaps that was part of it, but the doctors didn’t think medication was needed. She still had her friends she could call, and I went every day to see her and do the things she wanted done, but she spent the bulk of her time alone.

I finally came to understand that she was making this choice. I know one of her problems was she didn’t see herself being as “bad off” or as “old” as those other people. It’s amazing how many elders do this. It’s a kind of denial. “I’m in a nursing home, but I’m not as bad as these folks. I don’t have anything in common with them. They are in such sad shape.”

I would tell her what was coming up for entertainment. I could understand why she didn’t want to go down to see the “kitchen band.” Okay. That wasn’t her kind of music. But when a gifted pianist came to play? Mom played the piano. Her whole family had been musical. The nursing home provided a lovely tea party with the live piano music, but mom wouldn’t budge.

I understood she didn't like bingo. But they had card games. She liked cards when she was younger. But she wouldn't go. No matter what was offered, she wasn't interested.

I finally figured out what she was interested in. Complaining. She wanted to have something to complain about. That's right. That was her entertainment.

Mom had never been a negative person, but I think that this was a passive-aggressive thing. She had made the decision to move into the nursing home, as her falls were frightening. I was on emergency duty all the time, and I couldn't pick her up, so every time the dispatchers called (she wore a personal alarm), I needed to run over to her apartment, then call the firefighters to come and pick her up. We were becoming very unpopular with the fire department.

Finally, she said she wanted to join Dad and my uncle at the Rosewood. She was afraid to be alone. However, once she was there, she resented the move. Refusal to participate was her way of demonstrating her negative feelings.

What did I do? I learned to accept that she would complain of boredom. I did everything I could to keep her busy and entertained, but then I learned to drop it. If she'd rather be bored and complain than have an aide help her downstairs to hear some lovely music and have tea with people who could become friends, then that was her choice.

We must remember that elders still make choices. We may not agree. We may not think it's the best thing for them. But they still have the right to make choices. If their choice is to be bored, then so be it.

It's our choice, then, whether to let it bother us. We have to detach. Hard as it is, we will often have to do this during our caregiving years. We do our best to get what we see as positive results, and then detach ourselves from the situation.

We remind ourselves that is their choice. It's what they want, so then they are actually fine. It's us that suffer – generally from self-induced guilt. If they enjoy complaining, why should we deprive them of that? It's one of those times when

our best is good enough. The rest is up to them. We need to move on to other things.

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