

SENIOR FOCUS

WALK IN THEIR SHOES

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In 1968 a songwriter by the name of Joe South had a song titled "Walk a Mile in My Shoes." The basic theme of the song was that you need to see the world through someone else's eyes before you make any criticism. I think this holds true for those of us looking at residents in nursing homes, care centers, assisted living facilities and retirement homes. We are quick to poke fun at, ignore, alienate ourselves from or in general just pretend they don't exist. After all, they can't see well, their clothes don't match or buttons are unbuttoned, they have stains down the front of their shirts/blouses, they can't hear us unless we shout at them, they have to use a walker, they use canes, they use wheel chairs, they use hearing aids with those high pitched screeching noises, and on and on it goes. But wait a minute! Let's take a look at life through the eyes of an elderly person.

Imagine you are blindfolded and told to walk through the house. How many of us could walk through our home, no matter how familiar it is if we could not see? This is what the world is like if you have gone blind because of macular degeneration or some other eye disease. It could also even be what it might feel like if you have lost your glasses.

If you wear glasses or even if you don't, take a pair of glasses, heavily smear some Vaseline around the edges of the lenses, put a light coat on the center of the lens then put them on. Now try to read the newspaper or watch your favorite T V program. How successful are you with seeing? Are images sharp and clear so that you can easily identify them? This is what the world might look like to someone who has cataracts or is losing peripheral vision.

Tie your dominate arm behind your back. Now try to write your name on a piece of paper or on a blank check with your free hand/arm. How successful are you? Will anyone actually be able to know what you wrote? This is what it might look like for someone who has had a stroke and no longer can use the hand or arm that was usually used.

Have someone give you a series of random words. For example: cow, house, paper, glass, grass, feel, keys, finger and cold. Now, build a sentence with only these words. Hhhmm, they don't really make sense. This is how it might feel to try to speak or organize thoughts after a stroke or some other debilitating event has occurred in ones' life.

Have you ever received a new game and been told to go ahead and play it? How successful were you without the rules? That is how it is for someone when dementia has set in and he/she tries to figure out how to use a fork or spoon or find the way down the hall. The basics are known but how to accomplish the task is just too hard to figure out.

Have you ever walked off a plane in a new city and wondered where to go for the baggage claim? You read signs or asked for help, didn't you? But what would happen if you could not speak the language of those around you, you couldn't read the signs because they were written in a different language, or there were so many people rushing around you that you were pushed and shoved out of place? That's what it might feel like for someone with dementia who no longer recognizes faces, names, words or places. Going to your room is easy if you comprehend what "your room" is or where your room is, but it isn't easy if you don't remember any longer what those words and phrases mean.

The next time your loved one looks at you with a blank stare, the next time you see an elderly person turning around and appearing out of sorts, or the next time you meet someone in the hall in the nursing home, think about these things. Ask if you can help. "Do you need to find the rest room? Do you need to ...? Hi, my name is _____. Can you walk with me down the hall to the dining room? Would you like me to walk with you down to your room?" Don't embarrass elderly people by putting them down and telling them that they don't know something. Make them feel important. Ask them to help YOU understand. Walk a mile in their shoes and you might just discover how difficult life can be without compassion and empathy.