

The Aged Are People

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This treatise was written in the interest of the Nursing Home Profession and the patients in your care, by Dr. Park who has demonstrated his interest in this subject through his cooperation with the Minnesota Association.

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At this time we read with horror of the plight of Hungarian refugees who are being driven from their homes by the tyranny of their foreign rulers. We can picture the fantastic hardship which these men and women endure for the sake of freedom. We can imagine the inner distress of people who have to leave all behind them, their life's savings their hard won homes and treasured possessions, and become unknown displaced persons in a foreign land. Our hearts go out to them in heart-felt sympathy and we wish we could do something to help them. I suggest that when you again enter your nursing home that you look around and see how many displaced persons you have in your own homes.

Why! Your nursing homes are full of displaced persons. Old people, who have been driven out of their homes. People who know they are no longer wanted at home. People who have been pushed out of a way of living which they have known all their lives.

No wonder when you get them they are dejected, resentful, miserable and uncooperative. They are displaced persons and they feel like displaced persons. They are soured on everybody and largely without hope. In America we don't treat our old people very well. In the East and oriental countries where hardship and disease are obstacles which make old age very difficult to attain, the elderly person is venerated as a man who has fought a good fight against overwhelming odds and won. He is given an honored place at the table and fireside where he can dream in peace and comfort, with his opinions heard and respected.

When I am visiting some nursing homes I find the occupants cheerful and happy while in others I find a pall of gloom over the whole place. What makes the difference? You may say it is the type of patient. Some nursing homes handle cases that are sicker and more difficult than others,

some patients are more senile than others, etc. This may be partly true, but I do not believe it is the final answer because physically there are not such distinctive difference in the patients. I believe the secret lies in attitude. I mean the attitude of the nursing home operator, which is reflected in the attitude of the nursing staff which he gathers around him. You cannot successfully operate a nursing home unless you want to help people any more than a physician can be a success unless he wants to heal people.

I suggest that each of you search your own heart and determine just why you are in the business. If the reason is unworthy, you might ask yourself if you should not get out of it. If the reason is good, perhaps the next few remarks will be of some help to you.

What can you do with an ornery, belligerent and perhaps repulsive person who has just been admitted to your nursing home? It helps to remember that this old person is something like a child, who is torn by inner turmoil of conflicting emotions which he cannot control. Please remember the old adage that when a boy is behaving in his most unlovable manner he is most in need of love, and apply it to your patient.

Let us remember that while old people may be childish in many respects they are still people. People who have had a world of living and a world of experiences. We must treat them like responsible people and not like children.

Perhaps it will help you in your patient relationships if we consider briefly some of the basic psychological needs of people in general.

(1.) People are Fearful of Something New.

Any new situation or new way of doing things causes stress. The old way is easier because a habit or pattern has been established. This is particularly true of older people. We say they are set in their ways. However, old people can learn new methods and adapt to new situations, but it takes longer. It takes patience and more repetition, so don't expect the older person to accept your home and like

your routines immediately. Persist, and be consistent, but do it all with patience and understanding.

(2.) People are Led by Faith.

I don't think any of us realizes how completely we are interdependent and influenced by what other people think, do and say. It is impossible for each of us to investigate every detail of life and prove it for ourselves before we accept it. I believe a medicine is good for me because my doctor says so. I believe a food is good to eat because somebody else ate it, and liked it and so on. Old people, just like anyone else, will not be comfortable in your home until they learn to trust you. Do not do anything that will interfere with their building up faith in you, and your efforts to help them.

(3.) People are Afraid of Criticism, Afraid of Being Laughed At and Afraid of Doing Things Wrong.

Remember this, when a patient is trying to do something for you, or is trying to do something for himself, in your presence. His muscles and nerves may be impaired and he may find it very difficult to dress or eat. He will be much more unlikely to succeed, or even try, if you laugh at him, or criticize him for making a mess of things.

(4.) People want to Uphold Their Dignity and be Recognized as Persons.

Old people are no exception, although they may not have the spirit to protest. I have seen old people treated as if they had no intelligence whatsoever. They have been bathed in bed without a screen around them, placed in chairs without a robe to cover them and subjected to indignities no human being should be expected to put up with. The glib excuse, "they are too senile to know the difference" reveals a callous nurse who does not love people. This is an attitude of indifference which has no place in a nursing home. Let us treat our older people with respect for human dignity, whether they can appreciate it or not.

(5.) People want to Belong.

They want to be accepted for themselves, as individuals, and be welcomed into a communal relationship. Old people in a nursing home have lost this relationship which they had for years in their own homes. They look to you to make them a real part of your community. This means more than giving them a corner of their own. It means acquaintanceship and accept-

ance by your other patients. It is your duty to bring about this relationship.

(6.) *People Want a Sense of Accomplishment.*

Old people in a nursing home have usually reached the stage where little further accomplishment can be expected. However, if you are going to make them happy you will find out what they like to do and help them to continue to do things even in your nursing home. You might even use some patients to do little chores for you or other patients. You can help them to pursue their hobbies. If a woman likes to wash clothes, let her use your laundry. If a person likes to grow things, give her a plot of ground or some house plants. Do not forget that, for older people, this sense of accomplishment is sometimes satisfied by reviewing the feats of the past, so don't discourage an old person when he wants to talk about the things he has done. It will do him good and perhaps increase your appreciation of him.

(7.) *People Want to be Appreciated.*

They are hungry for praise. Always

express your appreciation for a work done or a gift for you. The workmanship may be faulty, because of physical infirmities, but the wish to please is there and the need for appreciation is the same.

(8.) *People Want to Own Things.*

Do remember that old people for years have had things of their own and when they come to your nursing home they need to have some things which they can call their own. They need their own bed, their own easy chair and a private bedside table where they can keep the little things which are so precious to them. Always respect these personal belongings and encourage them to have them. They make a very important link with their past lives.

(9.) *People Want Security.*

Old people can no longer work for security. When they reached your nursing home they have lost most of the security they have striven for. Make your nursing home as comfortable as you can and make your patients feel that it is their home and that they are secure and safe there.

(10.) *People Want Something to Hope for.*

The dynamic power of life revolves around hope. People labor for hope of food, love, and the promise of better things. It is hope that keeps alive the will to fight. No army can win a battle when hope is gone. Loss of hope leads to suicide. Everyone must have something to hope for to stay alive. Old people, too, need hope. Sometimes it is hope for recovery from the present illness. Sometimes it is only hope for a more comfortable day tomorrow. You must keep hope alive for the well-being and health of your patients. When you can't see where there is anything to hope for, don't forget that old people are on the brink of realization of the greatest hope conceived by man, the hope of eternal life. Lend your support and enlist the help of religious leaders to fan that hope into the flame of certainty. Then your nursing home will be a blessed place for an old person to live, and end his days.

*An address given by W. E. Park, M. D., before the Twin Cities Nursing Home Assn. at the Curtis Hotel, Minneapolis, on November 13, 1956.

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