

Aging & Diversity

America is growing older and becoming more diverse. According to a recent press release issued by the U.S. Census bureau, 20% of U.S. residents are expected to be 65 or older by the year 2030, and, “Minorities, now roughly one-third of the U.S. population, are expected to become the majority in 2042.” Generational and cultural diversity are important to understand as individual attitudes, beliefs and customs reflect our ethnicity and experiences that have shaped our life.

“It seems like all too often our diversity highlights our differences as a negative when in fact we have so much to learn from people of different ages and cultures,” said Mary Doepke, RN, Owner of Home Helpers. “Our diversity adds to the rich tapestry of America that may be best reflected in art, music, poetry, politics and more,” she added. The diversity in America also tends to be quite visible in health care as it influences how people age, their health and wellness practices, and how younger generations revere and support older adults.

Diversity may be best reflected in the 2008 presidential election, in which the oldest-ever candidate ran against the first-ever African-American candidate, who went on to become president.

It is important not to classify groups of people in categories that are too broad, as doing so may fail to reflect variations specific to each culture. For example, the term Hispanic or Latino represents populations from over 20 countries including people who are Mexican-American, and those from Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Recognizing that people are different, it is essential that health care and social services professionals honor and respect people’s cultural values and customs.

As professionals in the home health care industry, we recognize the need to promote cultural sensitivity and provide culturally sensitive care. We recognize that in many cultures, family members tend to be quite involved in health care decisions. In addition, spiritual and religious practices are often a source of strength for people dealing with life events, illness and other stressors.

With many different cultures in the U.S., it may not be possible for people to have in-depth knowledge of each culture; however, we can be culturally sensitive. Things to consider include:

- Perceptions and practices specific to health and illnesses, including acceptable treatments and therapies, the roles of medicines, foods, prayer, etc.
- Views of health care providers (e.g., due to a history of discrimination, many African-American elders are reluctant to trust organizations and professionals).
- Preferences and boundaries specific to gender, physical touch, privacy, trust, power, etc.
- Communication style (e.g., eye contact, direct questions, who is involved in the decision-making process, body language, use of formal names, hand shaking, health literacy).
- Preferences for people whose primary language is not English (e.g., use of an interpreter, family as interpreter, seek out providers who speak native language).

Another way to help ensure the preservation of one’s cultural values and beliefs is to ask open-ended questions to discover individual perceptions and preferences. For more information on Cultural Competency, visit the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office of Minority Health’s website at <http://www.omhrc.gov/templates/browse.aspx?lvl=1&lvlID=3>.

Empathy in Communications

Can you think of a time when:

- A friend was facing a difficult situation, and you found yourself at a loss for words?
- You may have been angered by someone saying, “I completely understand how you must feel,” when you felt they had no idea?
- Someone might have said something to you that seemed inappropriate?

When facing a difficult situation such as the loss of the job, the realization that your life savings was swindled through a bogus investment scheme, or the diagnosis of a chronic medical condition, there are many things that affect how we feel and behave. Some situations may bring uncertainty about the future. Others may be difficult because what happened was unexpected. Whatever the situation, when there is a feeling of loss or disappointment, people’s response and words often have the power to help or to hurt. Many times, people say nothing at all because they do not know what to say or are afraid they will say the wrong things. Avoidance is rarely a good solution.

In a society where news, weather and sports are often the preferred topics of conversation, many people may not be comfortable talking to people or about situations where there may be emotional distress. Younger generations may struggle most as they often choose the convenience of more impersonal communications methods such as e-mail and text messaging.

To help you understand effective ways to support and communicate with people who find themselves at a crossroads, it can be helpful to understand and distinguish between empathy and sympathy. While the dictionary defines them similarly, they are quite different.

Have you ever made a comment like, “*Until they walk a mile in my shoes, they’ll never understand?*” Empathy is what we do to try to understand another person’s situation and feelings. For example, a comment like “*I completely understand how you must feel,*” would come across as inappropriate unless you have personally experienced a situation that is almost identical to what the other person is going through. Instead, empathy is about asking questions, gaining perspective, acknowledging a situation and communicating understanding. Examples of questions or statements that are empathetic include:

- “*How does this make you feel?*”
- “*So, what I’m hearing is ...*”
- “*What seems to be the most challenging?*”
- “*That’s really tough.*”
- “*Tell me more about ... ?*”
- “*I imagine that must be ...*”
- “*What’s most important to you?*”
- “*I can only imagine ...*”
- “*How are you going to decide about ... ?*”
- “*Sounds like you are ...*”

Sympathy is when we feel sorrow for person and the situation. For example, we might say something like, “I’m so sorry for your loss.” Sympathy is often communicated in greeting cards or by sending flowers whereby sorrow is expressed. Sympathy tends to be expressed when a situation occurs. Sympathy is also appropriate as ‘firsts’ after a loss, such as a first Mother’s Day, Thanksgiving, birthday or anniversary.

“Empathy and sympathy are two different ways to help comfort and encourage others. At Home Helpers we place tremendous emphasis on understanding our clients and what matters most to them and their families,” Doepke said. “By understanding their challenges, needs and preferences, we are better able to individualize each client’s care plan and provide the level of care and attention people expect and deserve.”

Sprucing Up For Spring

March 20 is the first day of spring, and it won't be long before people are sprucing up their yards, spreading mulch, planting gardens and beautifying their homes.

"It is at the change of each season that I am often reminded of activities that many of our clients are unable to safely perform," said Mary Doepke, RN, Owner of Home Helpers. Regardless of whether functional limitations are due to pregnancy induced bed-rest, age-related health problems, or an injury, some people may be unable to participate or they may be restricted from certain activities.

At Home Helpers, we often encourage families to consider how to best use their time. Knowing that there are often more things to do than time allows, people often find peace in being purposeful. For example, if you had limited time with your loved one, and you could only do one of the following, which would you pick and why?

- Helping a loved one with daily activities
- Driving a loved one to, and participating in, a medical appointment
- Preparing and planting a garden that a loved one could enjoy for weeks

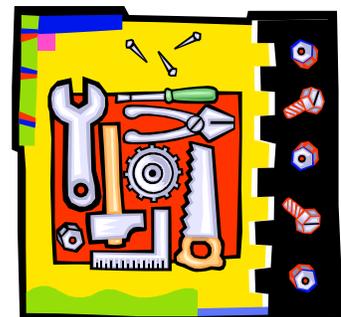
Part of being purposeful is to consider the ways in which spending your time and energy will bring the greatest satisfaction to everyone involved. Many of our clients' family members share with us that the care and support we provide enables them to focus their time in other, more meaningful ways. People are often forced to choose between completing tasks, spending time enjoying someone's company, and handling projects that are sure to bring a smile to someone's face.



Over the years, we have seen many people express their kindness by their actions. The following are two specific acts of kindness that we know have made a difference in the lives of the recipients.

1. Show up early one day and take on a project. The adult children and grandchildren of one family come together each spring to work in the yard and on the flower beds. As they put it, "It is always a day-long activity of family fun." Then each week someone is back to water the plants, pull weeds, pick the vegetables and more.

2. Coordinate a service project. Is there a home in your neighborhood that could use a coat of paint? Does it appear that someone's yard has become overgrown to the point where it may be unmanageable? Get some folks together and commit to completing a project or spending a few hours lending a helping hand. People who have benefited from a service project usually say that the effort and outcome are priceless.



"Helping to do for others what they may not be able to do for themselves is quite humbling and gratifying. I truly believe the joy we and others experience as a result of giving outweighs the perceived value of the person who receives," Doepke added.



HOME HELPERS® – *Making Life Easier* SM

Home Helpers offers quality non-medical and personal care services similar to the care and support often provided by family members. Our flexible care plans are tailored to fit our clients' specific needs and budgets.

Home Helpers begins with a free in-home consultation, preferably at the care recipient's residence. This gives us the opportunity to ...

- Meet the client and assess the situation.
- Make sure the requested services can be properly and safely performed.
- Ensure the Caregiver assigned possesses the personality, skill set and passion that best meet the care recipient's needs.

Home Helpers' experienced and Compassionate Caregivers are bonded, insured and carefully screened. Our Caregivers are employees, not subcontractors, thereby minimizing client liability.

To learn more about Home Helpers, call (630) 323-7231 or visit us on the Web at www.MaryAndMikeCare.com.

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