

I feel the need to revisit an issue I've written of before. It is the issue of trying to shield our older adults from the truth about family members and loved ones. It comes from an experience I had very recently.

Her daughter was in the hospital for major surgery, the outcome of which was very much in question. She wanted very much to be at the hospital with her son as her daughter had this surgery. But the son and the daughter, with the best of intentions, had decided she should not be there. "Mom," they said, "it will be too upsetting for you. You can come, someone will take you in a day or two."

Because she is 90 and has some health issues of her own, the legitimate concern was for her well being and her ability to handle the stress of waiting, and of ultimately seeing her daughter with the tubes and machinery associated with such surgery.

What the daughter and the son did not see is what I saw when I went to see her during this time. She was distraught, she was insulted, she was angry, she was feeling unneeded and a burden - certainly not what her family intended. She said, "Look at me, am I better sitting here worrying alone and imagining the worst, or would I be better if I thought I was where I belong, being a mother?" A legitimate concern as well!

We are too quick to make an assumption about older people and their inability to cope with crisis. At 90, this woman has undoubtedly faced many crises. She has developed skills to cope along the way. Is it possible her need to be involved with her family outweighed the prior concern? Was she more upset by being excluded than she would have been had she been included?

In ministry with older adults our assumptions about who they are and what they can handle predispose us to certain answers. Challenge those assumptions! Discuss them with the one(s) most affected by them - the older adult(s). If they are cognitively able to make their own decisions, do not make them for them. Older adults are not children and resent being treated as such.

Jim Stinson
Consultant on Older Adult Ministries