

We are engaged in a major renovation of our resident apartments at the United Methodist Homes in Shelton, CT. Needless to say it is a difficult process for the residents who need to be moved to another apartment while their apartment is being gutted and rebuilt. The other day our administrator remarked that he had greatly underestimated the ability of our residents to adjust to these necessary moves. He was rightly concerned that moving people in their eighties and nineties – even temporarily – would be more traumatic than some would tolerate. But the residents seem to be coping quite well.

What happened, we wondered? Why is this aged population dealing so well with forced change, with the inevitable noise and dirt that accompanies such projects, and with the unknowable date of when they can move back to their “own” apartment? Indeed why are some of them even enjoying their new surroundings?

We think we know! First of all, before each move, we took pictures of each apartment showing the details of where pictures were hung, clothing was stored, and furniture was placed. To the best of our ability the temporary apartments were arranged accordingly. The residents know that when they move back to their own place, it will be arranged the same way again, if that is what they want. Second we constantly acknowledge how difficult the change must be and commend them on how well they are coping. And third we, as staff, have made ourselves available to anyone at anytime who is having a concern with the process.

It strikes me that as people age and life forces changes on them, these are things to remember. Change at best is difficult for some and very traumatic at worst for others. Familiar things, arranged in a familiar pattern helps many a transition. Acknowledging how difficult it is allows the person to know that their feelings of displacement and loss are normal. Commending a person on her adjustment goes a long way in encouraging the process. It is a way of saying, “I know you can do it. You have what it takes!” Being available through times of change relieves the loneliness and sense of “no one cares what I’m going through.”

Pastors, concerned lay people and family do well to remember the ministry of caring is about meeting people where they are and providing the encouragement and wherewithal to move on. It is too easy to simply expect the older adult to “be realistic” and face the truth. It is too easy to say, “You’re intelligent, you know you must make this change.” A caring ministry helps to create an environment in which change – even if not welcomed – is seen as acceptable and workable.

Give your older loved ones the gift of understanding the difficulty of facing unwanted changes in their lives and the gift of your presence and support. Most will find what they need in that and begin to adjust.

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