

Sharing Bad News with the Older Adult

Her grandson is seriously ill, possibly even terminally ill, but the family hasn't said anything to her. The consensus is that "Grandma" has enough problems of her own to worry about. "Why make her feel bad about something she cannot change," they ask? How often, in the name of compassion, we hide the truth from the aging. Both lay persons and clergy often take this route of dealing with difficult issues.

My questions to them are always the same. How would you feel if your family arbitrarily left you out of such a situation? How would you feel to know nothing about a family member's illness and suddenly be told that person has died? An older adult, generally speaking, regardless their physical condition, has not lost the ability to care, to feel, to show compassion. To deny a person that privilege is to tell her what she may already fear, that she really is no longer important. To not tell the person about such things is to set up a dynamic of mistrust. Why would she believe you the next time that she asks about a family member or friend if you have already lied to her before? Unless there is an overwhelming psychological or physical reason for keeping the truth from the older adult, he has the right to be informed.

How that information is shared matters!

Appropriate timing is important! Who will be there to assist in the processing of the information? Who will support the person in the days to come as "coming to grips" sets in?

Attitude matters! Is the one relaying the information comfortable with someone else's emotions? Can they allow any feelings to be okay? Do they understand sickness and death to be part of the natural process of life, allowing them peacefulness in sharing the news?

Spirituality matters! Is the one sharing the news ready to see physical issues as only part of the story, able to allow the older adult to share his faith (or lack of it) without critique? Is he or she comfortable with prayer if that is what the older adult wants at such a time?

If you believe, as I do, that aging is often over-emphasized at the expense of seeing a whole person, you will resonate with my reasoning. Being older does not make a person less capable of handling the difficult moments of life. In fact it may enhance the ability. There is wisdom that comes with aging. Older adults have spent a lifetime learning how to deal with the truth. Trust them with it! Quite possibly they will teach you something about dealing with difficult times!

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