

“I’m so angry I could scream!”

It was not the reception I expected when I knocked on the door of one of our residents. Normally she is sweet and pleasant, usually unruffled by life’s little annoyances.

“What’s going on? Why are you so upset? Can I help somehow?”

“You bet you can! Tell that aide that comes to help me in the morning to stop treating me like a child. Because my legs don’t work doesn’t mean my head doesn’t. She makes me so mad!

My friend spoke volumes in her little outburst. Too often caregivers, meaning well, infantilize an older person simply because of an ailment or a disability. Too often those who care make unwarranted assumptions about older adults. Because our bodies often become frailer than in younger years, and because age often brings cognitive changes, caregivers often assume if one happens, so does the other. This is simply not so! There are plenty of frail and physically limited people whose minds are intact and deserve to be related to as adults! Moreover, even cognitively changed older adults are still adults and deserve to be treated as such. I understood my friend. No adult wants to be treated as a child! No one like being told what to do! No one likes to be without choices! Older adults, with limitations of one kind or another, often feel devalued by virtue of their conditions. Treating them as if that is the truth only makes them feel even more devalued.

So here are some thoughts based on my experience in working so extensively with older adults and watching and listening to their responses to such treatment.

1. Every person has a name! Use it! Names intended to show endearment are often received as degrading and infantilizing. Refrain from “Sweetie,” “Dearie,” “Honey” and such. Unless your relationship warrants that kind of intimacy, such names are not appropriate.
2. At every step of the way, partner with the one for whom you are caring. Only do for him or her that which he or she cannot do alone, unless specifically invited to do otherwise.
3. Respect the idea that the one being cared for may differ with you as to what and how something needs to be done. Don’t assume orneriness, obstinacy, or anything else if she sees needs differently that you do! You might be missing an insight that she has and you do not.
4. Remember everyone is capable of teaching something. Allow yourself to be led by the one for whom you are caring.