

Rugged independence can work against you

By Ellen Waldman

June 23, 2022

"As I've gotten older, I've come to realize how fruitless it is to just dig one's heels in. I've come to realize we all lose when we are stubborn, righteous, and unwilling to bend..."Maria Shriver

I recently gave a talk at Mountain Meadows in Ashland (<http://www.mtmeadows.com>), a 55+ retirement community. The title was "Aging Graciously: How to make it easier for yourself and others". Gracious means accommodating, amiable, considerate, and marked by kindness, which are all qualities innate to us and can be accessed anytime. Should be easy to age graciously then, but it often isn't.

After 22 years in the field, I have seen a common thread that causes a whole host of difficulties. It seems to center around this idea that being "fiercely independent" as we continue to age is somehow the ideal to aspire to. I'm not sure I agree. In fact, this very strong belief in being totally independent is likely to cause more rifts and heartaches in families than anything else.

If someone is diagnosed with either dementia or another cognitive impairment, we understand that they will continue to think they can manage their lives just as well as they always have. If someone has a long-standing mental health diagnosis, then too, we accept that they can't evaluate what's no longer possible for them to do as they age.

But what are you supposed to do when a family member or friend who needs assistance refuses all offers of help? When you see someone struggling, turning away from this support, we need to have this conversation.

Underlying all the apparent stubbornness is the belief that nothing has changed that they can't manage on their own. Their life or health is not as it was, but still, they maintain that they don't need to make any changes. Even when all evidence points to the contrary, people remain stuck and resist considering options.

Families practically fall apart over this. One son who lives here told me that it's gotten so hard, that it actually comes down to "his marriage or his mother". This is very sad and can be otherwise, if we're willing to face this and talk about it. And preferably ahead of time.

We're brought up to cherish the idea of life-long, rugged independence. This is unrealistic for so many reasons. Giving and receiving help is truly how we're built. Aging can go so much easier by welcoming and allowing the changes. This might also include the necessity for more hands onboard to meet your needs.

We might take a positive cue from a local woman. "Susan" lived here for a long time, was very active in the community, and in her retirement years, held positions of great responsibility as a volunteer. Her beloved husband died of dementia and she was left to consider her next phase of life. She had a great home, and lots of friends and activities to keep her engaged. But her family, who lived out of state, wanted her closer to them for her oldest years yet to come. She would also have plenty of time to spend

with her grandkids if it wasn't a full-day's drive to see them. Susan chose to weigh her options, absorb her family's input, pack up her belongings and begin her new life with family closer at hand. No muss or fuss for anyone and no need for her to dig in her heels, just to make the point that she's heroically independent.

Perhaps options like this will work for you. In any case, expect that your life will continue to change, and hopefully you'll change along with it. If you're willing, you'll see the wisdom in graciously aging with good-heartedness. What a benefit this will be for you and those around you.