



Transforming Relationships: Seeing Aging Relatives Through New Eyes

I often discuss how our relationships with our aging relatives can be transformed by honoring them as individuals separate from us. In this article, I'm going to present another method for transforming these relationships: seeing your aging loved one through new eyes.

This is the technique I suggest you try for at least 24 hours: Listen to your aging relative (this works just as well with other family members) as though you have just met her, as though you have no previous knowledge about her before this conversation. Just pretend that you are a stranger who doesn't have any history with this person.

In a workshop I lead we ask participants to go home and try this technique with their families. The next morning people return to Day 2 of the workshop and share their experiences; which are truly amazing. In every workshop the response is the same: participants tell us they can't believe such a simple thing can make such a profound difference.

This technique is extraordinarily successful when people want to "recreate" a relationship with someone whom they've known for a long time. In long term relationships we develop a set of expectations for how the other person will react or respond. Often before they even speak we are certain we know what they are going to say. Or, if they start to tell us a story we have heard before we "tune out" or only half-listen. We often listen least to the people we love the most!

Recently I tried this technique with my elderly Father who frequently tells me stories I have heard repeatedly through my life. This time, I decided to listen to these stories as if they were being told to me by a stranger - someone I had just met. I was pleasantly surprised by the results. I heard many things about my Father's experiences during World War II in Panama that I had never heard before. I found myself genuinely interested in his stories rather than just waiting for him to finish. Because I was behaving as though I hadn't heard these stories countless times, I asked many questions that it had never occurred to me to ask in the past. He was delighted and shared more stories with me. That day I learned things about my Father I had never known. And he felt valued and appreciated – two of the things we all want the most from the people we love. Had I not changed my perspective, I would have missed out on a wonderful opportunity to know my Father in a new way.

I remember a story from a workshop participant who tried this technique on a trip she took with her elderly husband. She was dreading this trip because they were traveling with a group of strangers and her husband talked constantly with anyone who would listen, a behavior that drove his wife crazy! She decided to approach this trip as though SHE was just meeting her husband and didn't know about his "irritating" habit of talking constantly.



When she returned from the trip she called me and told me this trip was the best time she had ever had traveling with her husband. When she stepped back and saw her husband through new eyes – the eyes of a stranger – she found her husband was a fascinating conversationalist, not just an incessant chatterbox. People on the trip loved her husband and he kept everyone entertained for days. The wife came home with a new appreciation for her husband...as well as a transformed relationship with him.

This technique takes practice. You don't have to do it perfectly to get benefits...just remind yourself to try again when you slip back into your old perspective – the one that already knows everything about your aging relative, how they think and what they will say. And as you see your loved one through new eyes, watch how your relationship transforms to one of greater appreciation for each other.

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