

Late Life Disabilities: A Challenge that Can Be Overcome

A disability that occurs in later life -- whether a stroke; an illness that robs an elder of mobility, vision, or hearing; or another condition -- presents special challenges to both the person experiencing the physical limitation and their family. While for some people the adjustments may be minimal, for others trying to cope with a disability may come at the same time as unrelated memory problems, financial difficulties, bereavements, and loss of friends related to aging. Further, family members who at an earlier time could have provided support and assistance may themselves be experiencing age-related limitations.

The many, many active people with disabilities who come to the Council on Aging prove, however, that a physical challenge need not mean the end of enjoying life. If you have been looking forward to retirement as a time to pursue interests and dreams you may very well still be able to do so.

A first step to attaining the best quality of life possible, as we have found from those who come to the COA, may be realizing that you and your family have suffered a loss and allowing yourself adequate opportunity to grieve that loss. You may experience some or all of the things that people who grieve over the death of a loved one face. Denial is one possible stage, and with it, bargaining for life to be the same as it was. You may find, particularly soon after a disability, that you awaken from sleep or from focusing on something other than the disability with a sudden jolting realization that the disability really does exist. After a time you may feel acceptance as the strength and power of the human spirit comes forth. As you focus on living, you allow yourself to realize that bad things don't happen to just other people and you come to grips with being able to cope. Strength and perseverance bring the links of days together into a chain that becomes the future.

One important way to cope with some of the emotional aspects of becoming disabled while gaining information from those who have had your same experience is by joining a discussion group. Call the COA to find out about groups in our area.

As you are coping emotionally with the disability, you can begin to try to find ways to do the things you have always enjoyed or have always wanted to do. While you may not be able to do exactly what you had planned for your later life, you may be able to attain your goals in another way. For example, you may not be able to baby-sit grandchildren by yourself, but you can still supervise and enjoy them as long as someone else can do the running. You may not be able to go ballroom dancing, but you can still go to concerts and enjoy the music.

Seniors at the COA have found that it is important as you begin to rebuild your life to ensure that those who are providing your care, including doctors, physical and occupational therapists, and others, understand that you wish to return to as active a life as possible. If you used to engage in any particular activities, such as golf, artwork, or other special hobby, let them know so that they can assist you in finding ways to do these again. You may also wish to explore as many health care options as possible. Some of

those with disabilities at the COA believe that both acupuncture and therapeutic massage have been of benefit in helping them regain functioning.

A physical challenge need also not be the end to dreams of traveling in retirement. Many of those at the COA have been able to continue to travel as long as they remember a few tips when making arrangements. First, when making airline reservations, ask for wheelchair at the airport and all connecting airports if this would help you. Also, let the airline know if you or your family member will need to use a wheelchair once you are on the plane until you are seated. When making hotel reservations be sure that the reservation clerk knows exactly what kinds of adaptations to your room you will need. If you need to rent a car you can ask to have a mechanic available to install you adaptive equipment when you pick up your car.

A variety of community resources are also available to assist you in gaining your highest level of functioning. If you need in-home services you may contact the Council on Aging's Elder Services Coordinator, Wendy Aronson, who can help you determine what services, such as homemaker, personal care or home health care, you need and where you might obtain them. Minuteman Senior Services can also provide a number of in-home services, including private care planning, free for those with more limited incomes or for a fee for those whose incomes are above the guidelines. You may contact them at 781-272-7177.

More and more elders with disabilities are moving into assisted living facilities that offer independence combined with in-home services in an environment adapted for those with limited mobility. The Council on Aging can also assist you in finding and visiting area facilities.

Those whose disabilities require special equipment, such as shower or toilet seats, walkers, or canes, may contact the Bedford Board of Health to determine if they can meet your needs through their medical equipment loan program. They can be reached at 781-275-6507.

Transportation can become a difficult challenge for those in wheelchairs. If you have a disability that will be of at least six month's duration, you may wish to call The Ride at 1-800-533-6282. This program of the MBTA offers wheelchair accessible, door-to-door transportation.

For more information on services for those who have disabilities later in life, call the Bedford Council on Aging at 275-6825 or come by Monday through Friday between 8 and 4.