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Silver Threads

Some Strategies for Successful Aging

By Bobye Anderson

“Successful aging is like world peace. Everyone is for it, but they’re not sure how to make it happen.” This quote by Specialist in Aging Helen Dennis speaks to the desire in all of us to age with dignity and resiliency. It is doubtful that we will miraculously avoid the ache of an arthritic joint, the dependence on an arm or a cane for stability, and the frustrated search for a misplaced object. Yet the definition of successful aging is evolving from being purely health-based to one of the quality of daily living and functional independence. This Silver Threads article will explore some of the strategies that volunteers who work with the elderly are observing.

Strangely enough, the simple act of volunteering is one of the key strategies. A British report published this summer stated that people who volunteer in their communities live longer and have happier lives; the key factors seem to be their increased physical activity, social connections, and sense of usefulness and self-worth. Volunteers also tend to stay active in their communities and maintain the social connections so crucial to avoiding the isolation that can occur as we age.

Providing these social connections for seniors is a primary goal of many Falmouth organizations. Brenda Swain of the Falmouth Service Center relates how the Falmouth Eats Together community dinners have the unintended but very positive consequence of providing an intergenerational meal for our elderly; they enjoy the interaction with the young families. Carol Martin, Coordinator of the Service Center’s Home Delivery Program says that the recipients are nourished by both the food and the social contacts in the program. Transportation, always a challenge in a town as large as Falmouth with limited public options and stretched resources, is helped by volunteers like Michael Cullen who drives for both the Falmouth Senior Center and Meals on Wheels. When asked about his helping, he gave an immediate and enthusiastic “Unbelievable!” Volunteers working with the elderly receive back the unexpected benefit of seeing successful aging in place. It gives a unique opportunity of having access to a variety of people in a meaningful way.

The skill of being resilient, of accepting changes and adapting to them, is another key ability that volunteers observe. Marge Benoit, a long-time volunteer in the Friendly Visitor program with the Falmouth Senior Center, developed a deep friendship with a woman poet who although legally blind, continued to write and publish her work. Feeling the movement of her pencil in forming letters and using special paper with raised dots for lines, she wrote to revisit her childhood and to give voice to her emotions and her humor. Marge continues to volunteer and see how seniors seeking independence focus less on their physical challenges and more on utilizing their abilities.

As we age, meeting the challenges and decisions needed in daily living can seem overwhelming. And yet Neighborhood Falmouth volunteer Jack Easterling feels that it is that very act of facing those challenges which keeps many seniors living with independence and confidence. He says that their active involvement in their own lives is key in maintaining their autonomy and confidence; some of the skills volunteers see are things like keeping up with daily tasks, making decisions about home maintenance, menu planning and food preparation, solving problems and asking for assistance and referrals when needed, and even taking care of pets and houseplants. No matter what their living situation, seniors do best when they make as many of their own decisions as possible and are actively involved in how those decisions affect them.

Our aging is inevitable but our quality of life can remain a variable. Many town organizations and congregations work both individually and in partnership to help contribute to the best quality of life possible for our seniors. They would agree that the strategies mentioned here of volunteering, having an active social and community life, being resilient and flexible with challenges, and being actively involved in decision-making are all key to aging successfully and with dignity. But perhaps Volunteer Bobbie Miner of Neighborhood Falmouth states the skills most succinctly: “These wonderful people have taught me about the power of acceptance and gratitude in spite of losses and increased vulnerabilities. They have taught me about courage because it takes just that to choose to continue to live life as fully and vitally and independently as possible in the midst of daily struggle. They have taught me about the importance of living in the present moment. What might have initially been a forced slowing down on my part to accommodate to their slower pace has now become something I truly look forward to and work to create in my own life. They have taught me about simplifying my priorities and keeping a balanced perspective on what is truly important. They have taught me about humility and about asking when you need help. They have taught me about taking joy in exactly that which is in front of me....life, pure life itself.” These truly are keys to success in life no matter the age.

Silver Threads is created especially for people spending their golden years in Falmouth, written by these same senior citizens and presented by Neighborhood Falmouth, a nonprofit, membership organization, operating since 2009 to help Falmouth seniors live safely and comfortably in their own homes. For more information on joining, volunteering and donating, call [508-564-7543](tel:508-564-7543); or visit www.neighborhoodfalmouth.org.