

Elderly and Families: Intergenerational Respect and Love

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A unique relationship segment of many of our lives include the elderly. Some of you may consider yourself to be an elder, or have an elderly loved one in your family. A special mental health concern for an elder is that of clinical depression. Researchers believe that 10% to 20% of the population, or roughly two million people (Blazer, 1994; Hart, 2003) struggle with significant depressive symptoms. A few of these symptoms (some of which overlap with general population depression) include sadness, social withdrawal, prolonged crying spells, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, death wishes, changes in memory, and changes in eating and sleeping patterns. However, according to Dr. Archibald Hart, "depression doesn't have to be a given, nor does it have to be so devastating" (2003), for an older person.

Two known precursors to depression in the elderly is loneliness and isolation (Hart, 2003). Hart points out that often there is a loss of identity and a sense of uselessness that permeates the elder's mind and heart. If an elder within your family fits this description, or if you consider yourself cut-off from the mainstream of life as you once knew it, there are effective mental health interventions available to bring hope and restoration. These include anti-depressant medication, challenging negative thinking patterns, and supportive family members. In addition, accurate and immediate assessment is crucial if alcohol abuse or suicidal ideation is suspected. Hart also suggests that family members can "reframe" situations for their loved ones, by lovingly pointing out a positive benefit for them. An example of this might be that through an assisted living facility, family members are able to enjoy more conversations and social times with their elderly loved one, because they are freed from the demands of their physical care.

However far and above the mental health component, is the hope, strength, and love that the elder can find in Jesus Christ. Scripture states how Jesus was familiar with suffering, and especially knew what it was like to feel despised and rejected (Isa. 53:3). Further support of this concept of familiarity of suffering can be found from the life of David: "The troubles of my heart have enlarged: Bring me out of my distresses!" (Ps. 25:16 & 17). It is most important for the child of God facing the aging process to know that Jesus, who sits at the right hand of God, not only was intimately acquainted with depression and loneliness, but also provides the ultimate deliverance from it.

I was privileged, this summer, to sit behind an older man at a series of Christian concerts held in Oshkosh, Wisconsin called "Lifest". One particular concert was especially geared toward youth, and my initial reaction toward this man was one of wonder: Would he enjoy this type of music? Could he even be turned off by it? It appeared as if the people he was sitting with were his son and his

grandchildren. Three important elements seemed available within this family structure, that are in line with effective mental health interventions for the elderly. These included:

1. A sense of identity and inclusion within the nuclear family. The family appeared to help this man feel appreciated and needed.
2. Inclusion in a social activity.
3. The family pointing the loved one to Jesus.

Many times during the course of this concert, this father and grandfather lifted his hands and his eyes in praise. He was acknowledging the One who knew him, even before he was formed in the womb (Jer. 1:5). The Lord desires His elderly loved ones to know that there is a future hope for them, and that their hope will not be cut off (Prov. 23:18). He wants to bring them to His holy mountain. He wants them to experience the joy of God's salvation being restored.

If you belong to a family in which an elder is a part of, pray and ask God what your part might be in helping that loved one experience this confidence, love, and peace from God. God often uses the family as one of the main emotional, practical, and spiritual support systems for elders, or as a link to other resources for them. This grandfather's heart was singing and his voice was not silent. Your elderly loved one can also find completeness and restored life through family and appropriate mental health interventions. Ultimately, however, the elderly need to know that they are chosen of God, and in this precious season of their life, can experience a rejoicing spirit in Him.*

*Scripture inspired by Beth Moore's book [Praying God's Word](#).

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