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Hanging On and Letting Go

Recently the life of my father, an eighty-six year old widower, turned upside down. His number came up and he was offered a room at a local long-term care facility.

He had seventy-two hours to pack up his belongings and uproot himself from the home that he had shared with my mother. Dad had been on a disability pension since age sixty-two because of a heart attack.

As they approached their seventies I had persuaded my parents to move closer to me. They left their old neighborhood behind and never looked back.

They spent many happy years catching up on lost time together, although my mother worried about Dad's health and how she would one day live on her own. Ironically, it was Dad who needed to learn to live alone.

My mother, always a healthy woman, developed a sudden heart problem and died. After fifty-one years of marriage, it was devastating. Our family thought he might survive a year. He rallied and adjusted to his new life anyway.

A few years later he had a stroke that he survived without lasting effects. But he decided to give his car away for safety's sake. He began simplifying his life, shedding anything he couldn't use.

Soon after, a series of strokes affected his speech and ability to walk.

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Ask the Experts

Would a pet be a good idea for my senior parent?

Pros and Cons of Enjoying Companionship of a Pet

Pets can be an important part of a senior's life. They provide companionship and comfort, especially if the senior lives alone. A pet makes the senior exercise through walking, cleaning up after it and playing with it.

However, it is only fair that a dog or a cat also be well cared for by its senior owner. A senior must be able to walk a dog a few times every day and clean up after it during the walk. If a senior lives in a complex with other tenants, then the dog must be friendly and well-behaved. With a cat, their litter box needs to be cleaned on a regular basis. This is not always possible if the senior's health limits their physical abilities.

As well, many seniors are on a fixed income. Besides purchasing pet food and cat litter there are veterinary bills, which will increase as the pet ages. Claws need to be clipped. Some dogs and cats need to be trimmed and groomed. Medication may be required and perhaps ongoing if the condition is chronic.

If a senior decides that providing proper care for the pet is not possible, then serious consideration must be given to giving up the pet. This is not an easy thing to do, especially if the senior has had the pet for a long time. Hopefully, a family member will be able to take it or a good home can be arranged.

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Hanging On and Letting Go

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He fought back and learned to walk and talk again and despite the doctors' predictions resumed an independent life at home, although with part-time care.

Ultimately Dad faced a life and death crisis. He experienced complete renal failure and was told that with his age and damaged heart it was dangerous to do surgery. His other option was to die peacefully within twenty-four hours.

He chose the surgery but couldn't be revived and was placed on life support. Our family came in to say goodbye. On the third day he woke up and asked for a beer and recovered enough to be placed in a hospital room. He insisted my wife and I take a long delayed one-week vacation. On our last day we received an urgent message to go to the hospital. Dad's vital signs were failing and I spent an all night vigil by his bedside waiting for the end. At four in the morning he awoke and asked for tea. I couldn't believe it and reminded him that he was supposed to be dying.

"Too much work!" he grumbled, "I want to go home." A short time later he did and continued, with help, until the day we received the long-term care call.

Now as I cleaned out his house to prepare it for sale, I was grateful that my father had over the years already given away so many of his possessions to our family and others.

After bringing the few things we could to his new home, a single room, I had to dispose of the rest. It felt like I was erasing my parents' life. In a corner of the basement where Dad had kept a desk when he could still climb stairs, I removed the very last item – a small bulletin board on which he had pinned something he had written the year before my mother's death:

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Ask the Experts

Would a pet be a good idea for my senior parent?
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If no new home has been found contact the SPCA. Do not abandon the pet. Speak with the local SPCA to see if it can suggest an approved rescue group, which is sometimes available for specific breeds of animals.

Giving up a pet is stressful to both the senior and the animal. The older the cat or dog the less likely it is to be adopted. It is best if the animal can remain with a family member. This also allows the senior to continue to visit with the beloved pet. If the pet does have to be given away it is important to know that the senior will grieve for the loss of the dog or cat. The pet was much-loved and the grieving is real and must be respected.

A pet that is well suited for a senior is an older dog as this would avoid the puppy training and hyper/chewing stage. Smaller dogs have the ease of handling, and need less space, exercise and food. Choose a dog that is more likely to be content to lead a comparatively quiet existence and less likely to bark.

Cats are a great source of companionship while being able to look after themselves. Again, a slightly older cat will have gotten over the hyper and possible furniture scratching stage. Cats eat less and seldom need professional grooming. Older dogs and cats would have been neutered and have developed their final personality.

Sharen Marteny, CPCA, www.seniorsconsulting.net

Did You Know...

Cool Facts About the Human Body

Nerve impulses to and from the brain travel as fast as 170 miles per hour.

The brain operates on the same amount of power as ten-watt light bulb.

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Hanging On and Letting Go

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“Do not mourn the past;
be not anxious for the future.
You cannot live in the past:
The past is gone.
You cannot live in
The future: the future
Never arrives.
Strive always to live
In the present moment;
The present moment is
All that you have”.

-Albert Edward Atkins

I stood a long time pondering my father’s message on that scrap of yellow paper. I realized I have never seen anyone more tenacious or courageous in a fight for the important things in life nor so graceful and gentle when it came time to surrender. As I enter my sixties, I understand that all his life my father had been teaching me the art of hanging on and letting go.

Article by Alan Atkins, CPCA

Did You Know...

Cool Facts About the Human Body

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Neurons combine to exponentially increase the brain's memory storage capacity to something closer to around 2.5 petabytes (or a million gigabytes).

The brain itself cannot feel pain.

80% of the brain is water.

Blonds have more hair.

The largest internal organ is the small intestine.

You get a new stomach lining every three to four days.

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Seniors Tip

Take a Walk

- Walking improves fitness, over-all health and mental well-being:
- It refreshes the mind, reduces fatigue and increases energy levels.
- It engages over half of the body's muscles.
- It is a relatively injury-free form of exercise.
- Regular, brisk walks can reduce elevated blood pressure and improve digestion.
- Walking helps to strengthen bones and control osteoporosis.

Source: www.active2010.ca, Reprinted with Permission from Living Assistance Services, www.laservices.ca



Red Lentil Daal

Makes 6 servings

Ingredients-1 tbsp (15 ml) canola oil, 1 onion, small diced, 4 cloves of garlic, minced, 1 inch piece of fresh ginger root, peeled and grated, 2 tbsp (25 ml) curry powder, 2 cups (500 ml) dry red lentils, 4 cups (1 L) water, 1 cup (250 ml) packed, chopped fresh cilantro, ½ tsp (2 ml) salt

Directions-In a large soup pot heat oil over medium heat. Add onion, garlic, ginger and curry powder and cook for 2 minutes. Do not brown. Add lentils and water and cook for 20 minutes. Add cilantro and salt and cook for 5 minutes. Serve with brown rice or whole wheat naan.

Nutritional Information Per Serving-(¾ cup/175 ml)-
Calories: 250, Protein: 17 g, Fat: 3 g, Saturated fat: 0 g, Dietary cholesterol: 0 mg, Carbohydrate: 40 g, Dietary fibre: 9 g, Sodium: 205 mg, Potassium: 777 mg.

Developed by Nadine Day, RD. Reprinted with Permission from ©The Heart and Stroke Foundation.

Quote of the Month

Give Time to Our Family

After 21 years of marriage, my wife wanted me to take another woman out to dinner and a movie. She said, "I love you, but I know this other woman loves you and would love to spend some time with you." The other woman that my wife wanted me to visit was my MOTHER, who has been a widow for 19 years, but the demands of my work and my three children had made it possible to visit her only occasionally. That night I called to invite her to go out for dinner and a movie. "What's wrong, are you well?" she asked. My mother is the type of woman who suspects that a late night call or a surprise invitation is a sign of bad news. "I thought that it would be pleasant to spend some time with you," I responded. "Just the two of us." She thought about it for a moment, and then said, "I would like that very much."

Quote of the Month

When I arrived at her house, I noticed that she, too, seemed to be nervous about our date. She waited in the door with her coat on. She had curled her hair and was wearing the dress that she had worn to celebrate her last wedding anniversary. She smiled from a face that was as radiant as an angel's. "I told my friends that I was going to go out with my son, and they were impressed," she said, as she got into the car. "They can't wait to hear about our meeting." We went to a restaurant that, although not elegant, was very nice and cozy. My mother took my arm as if she were the First Lady. After we sat down, I had to read the menu. Her eyes could only read large print. Half way through the entries, I lifted my eyes and saw Mom sitting there staring at me. A nostalgic smile was on her lips. "It was I who used to have to read the menu when you were small," she said. "Then it's time that you relax and let me return the favor," I responded. During the dinner, we had an agreeable conversation – nothing extraordinary but catching up on recent events of each other's life. We talked so much that we missed the movie. As we arrived at her house later, she said, "I'll go out with you again, but only if you let me invite you." I agreed. "How was your dinner date?" asked my wife when I got home. "Very nice. Much more so than I could have imagined," I answered. A few days later, my mother died of a massive heart attack. It happened so suddenly that I didn't have a chance to do anything for her. Some time later, I received an envelope with a copy of a restaurant receipt from the same place mother and I had dined. An attached note said: "I paid this bill in advance. I wasn't sure that I could be there; but nevertheless, I paid for two plates – one for you and the other for your wife. You will never know what that night meant for me. I love you, son." At that moment, I understood the importance of saying in time: "I LOVE YOU" and to give our loved ones the time that they deserve. Nothing in life is more important than your family. Give them the time they deserve, because these things cannot be put off till "some other time."

Written by Stephen on October 14, 2008