

## Getting Out of the House Bringing The World Into The Homes of Elders

Later life can be time when frailty, diminishing sight and hearing, and loss of friends and family can make it easy to believe that you will spend the rest of your life at home alone with nothing to do. As a result, those who find it hard to leave home can easily become lonely, depressed, and even more frail. In fact, studies show that those who let their problems keep them inside and away from other people have more illnesses than others who make an effort to get out and maintain relationships with people. If you find yourself thinking “This is my life now and I’ll just have to live with it,” the time to break the cycle of increasing isolation is now.

Many of the older people who come to the Council on Aging have the challenges that keep others at home. These are some of the ways they have found to get out and about that you might find helpful.

First, go bionic. People come to the Council on Aging and participate in art and fitness classes, crafts programs, educational presentations, and many other activities while in their wheelchairs, with canes, with walkers, and with a variety of other devices. Both the Bedford Local Transit (BLT) and the MBTA’s Ride provide accessible transportation to the COA. New hearing aids and advances to help restore sight can make it possible for you to communicate again. In fact, those with hearing, sight, and mobility loss can now do almost everything that anyone else can do. Using these devices is not something to be ashamed of any more than you would be ashamed of standing on a footstool if you were too short to reach something on the top shelf. Call the Council on Aging for more information on how to obtain these devices.

Maintain and improve on the physical functioning that you have. You may be surprised to learn that you may be able to regain some of the strength you have lost. Research has shown that exercise can help even those who are in wheelchairs to regain mobility and the strength needed to remain independent. At the Council on Aging we offer a variety of fitness classes and activities, including aerobics, weight strengthening, Tai Chi, and a walking club, that have helped even the most frail stay in the best shape possible and prevent future declines.

Find others who face your same challenges. Whatever your challenges, someone else has also faced them and has found ways to live fully despite them. Seeking out others with your difficulties can be an important way to both solve problems and find new friends. The Council on Aging, local hospitals, social service agencies and others all offer a variety of discussion and support groups. If formal groups do not interest you, the Council on Aging may be able to point you in the direction of activities participated in by others with similar problems.

Actively seek new friends and companions through activities for those who share common interests. Many times friendship and even love have blossomed at the Council on Aging and Minuteman Senior Services Bedford Cafe site many times. No one can replace a friend or loved one whom you have known for decades, but it is never too late to build a network of friends. The easiest way is to join an activity at the Council on Aging or other organization for those who share your same interests. Groups have formed at the COA around books, arts and crafts, music, stamps, genealogy, and computers. Trips are also a good way to meet new friends. If you are shy about joining in with people you don't know, just remember that everyone in any group was the newcomer at some time. If you are not able to leave your home, the Council on Aging may also be able to match you with a friendly visitor or telephone friend with some of your same interests.

Finally, turn the time that you are home alone into quality time. Honor the urge to inner reflection. Getting out is important, but learning to enjoy and make good use of time spent alone is equally essential. For many people, especially those who worked hard with little time for leisure during younger years, not being busy means not doing anything worthwhile. However, in many cultures, older age is highly valued as a time when daily responsibilities are put aside and elders can reflect and make sense of their lives, pass on their wisdom by recording it or spending time with younger people, and engage in more spiritual pursuits. Instead of turning on the soap operas after lunch, sit outside into your garden and smell the roses, read some poetry, start a journal of your memories even if only you will read it, quiet your mind and think about what gives life meaning and how you can find it with what you have available.

Let loose your inner artist. No matter what your limitations, you can find some means of artistic expression. Music, painting, sculpture and pottery, weaving or stitchery, poetry, collage making... the possibilities for creativity are endless and if you think back hard enough you will surely find something that you enjoyed doing when you were younger, or vowed that you would do when you had time, that you can take up again. Older age is the perfect time to be creative because you no longer have to worry about recitals or concerts, making time for your art after work and family obligations are over, or making a career from art. You can simply enjoy it. Many people find that creativity is magic. Once you start doing something creative your sadness lifts, you step a little higher, and feel more like being with other people.

Even if you must stay at home due to frailty, that need not be the end of feeling useful. Many community organizations can use your skills, whether it is knitting caps for newborns, making blankets and other items to give to battered women's shelters at holiday time, making phone calls, or many other needed tasks. In many communities, older people who stay at home are valued for the stability and vigilance they give to a neighborhood by keeping an eye out for the safety of children playing outside or for strangers who might be planning burglaries. The Council on Aging or other organization can help you find volunteer opportunities if you would like them.

Older age and the physical challenges that come with it do not need to mean staying at home alone like your parents or grandparents may have done. For almost everyone, the

means exist to help you get out and meet people and do the things you enjoy. If you need some help or ideas, call the Council on Aging at 781-275-6825, your health care professional or religious counselor, or someone else you trust. Your world may have changed, but it can still be enjoyed.