



Tips for Communicating with Seniors Who May Be Reluctant to Accept Help

TRAIL's mission is to help older adults age safely and comfortably in their own homes. However, some older adults may be ambivalent or even resistant to suggestions from family and friends about joining TRAIL or taking advantage of the assistance TRAIL volunteers offer. When faced with this circumstance, it is helpful to understand why older adults may decline the kindness of others.

- A number of societal factors contribute to the hesitancy to accept care and support. For many, independence and individualism are primary, if not ultimate, values of American society.
- For example, in a recent survey by the National Council on Aging, 92% of adults over 65 say health is a problem for people over 65, but only 42% say it is a problem *for themselves*. Similarly, 84% say loneliness is a very or somewhat serious problem for adults over 65, but only 21% of those over 65 say it is for themselves. These data may not be surprising if we consider how we see ourselves with respect to our own age. We seldom think or feel that we are as old as we are.
- Pride may inhibit a person from accepting help.
- Embarrassment about one's circumstance or feeling ashamed in some way may add to hesitation to accept help; for example, there may be circumstances in the home (e.g., hoarding) that older adults don't want others to see.
- Many people view their homes as private sanctuaries and don't want strangers invading their space.
- An older adult may see the acceptance of help as a first step in giving up control and independence, and as an admission that he or she is a failure.
- People can be reluctant to bother, impose, disrupt, burden or intrude on others.
- People may not have learned how to ask for or accept assistance.
- People may minimize or underestimate the desire or willingness of others to assist.
- People may be confused about the nature of the help or services being offered; e.g., confusion between "home care" (such as the occasional in-home chores and companionship offered by TRAIL volunteers) and "home health care" (provided by medical professionals and often covered by Medicare)
- Accepting help may carry a social stigma that one is not independent or self-sufficient.

Family members, friends and volunteers can utilize several approaches to communicate that one cares and is available to help. In addition to maintaining healthy boundaries of self-determination, respecting the individual's right to make his or her own decisions and following other best practices for communicating with seniors, keep the following tips in mind:

- Use plain, clear and concrete terms to describe the types of services to be offered by TRAIL or other organization – by whom, how often, how long and at what cost. Provide information in a written format for easy reference. Understand that accepting help is a process, and people need time to review information.
- Initial and subsequent conversations should highlight how the older adult’s acceptance of help from a TRAIL volunteer can help relieve stress and worry on behalf of family members, for example, who may be serving as primary caregivers and providers of at-home help.
- Gently and sensitively point out to older adults how much control over their circumstances, increased self-determination, self-esteem, dignity and enjoyment TRAIL members have gained since using TRAIL’s services. Do not suggest that TRAIL has brought these gains about; rather highlight the achievement of the member. **It is their comfort that we desire, not our comfort.**
- Peer-to-peer conversations can sometimes be more effective than discourse involving family members and/or potential service providers. If the older adult has a same-age friend, neighbor or colleague who is involved with TRAIL, ask that associate invite the individual a TRAIL-sponsored or event, such as an informal lunch or coffee with fellow TRAIL members. Familiarity with a new situation or new friends can lower resistance to change.
- Suggest a one-time or short-term “test drive” of assistance, with a plan to evaluate the older adult’s experience after his or her interaction with TRAIL. Reassure the older adult that he or she can stop a service at any time if he or she is dissatisfied.
- Ask, don’t tell. Instead of arguing with the individual, follow up by inquiring, “Tell me more. What worries you? What are you most concerned about?” Older adults want to feel listened to and to have their concerns validated and heard.
- An individual’s reluctance to accept help from TRAIL or other community resources may prompt family members, friends or volunteers to believe that the individual does not need support. It is often the case, however, that the most resistant person is the one with the greatest need for socialization and support.
- If an older adult is doing something that puts his or her safety at risk, seek the help of the person’s physician or other professional. The older adult may be more willing to receive recommendations of help from someone in this position.
- If an older adult totally rejects offers of assistance despite sensitive approaches, such a refusal should be accepted without feelings of anger, frustration, hurt or rejection.
- It is TRAIL’s philosophy that what is good for another should be defined by that person, not imposed upon him or her by others, no matter how loving, well-meaning or good-hearted.

These conversations with aging family members, friends and neighbors are often difficult. Be patient whenever possible. Remember that care is a way of relating to someone that develops over time. For TRAIL volunteers and staff, caring for our members is a means to an end of a deepened relationship that honors our members’ dignity, value and desire for independence.

#