



It Is Not About The Shoe

CEO, AgeSong - From Assisted to Community Living

The phrase ‘person-centered care’ is used often in healthcare nowadays. It is applied in a way as if we all knew what this phrase means, that is that we want to focus on the person before us, want to make him or her the center of our care. The problem, however, lies in the fact that people have a different understanding of what they mean by ‘person’. The word person in everyday language refers as much to our identity, our emotional self, our likes and dislikes, and our needs and wants, as it does to our actual physical body.

In our everyday behavior, we know this well. We greet a person and make conversation first before we get to the point of our contact. As such, we make emotional contact a priority over the task at hand. Yet, in many healthcare settings,

especially in residential care communities, we observe that emotional contact with residents often takes a backseat to the task in front of us. In other words, care seems to be done backward, preferencing the care of the physical body over the emotional well-being of the person.

To illustrate this point further, picture an elder in an assisted living community who sits there with one shoe on his foot, the other below the chair. Your supervisor tells you to put on his other shoe. You approach the elder and want to fulfill the request made of you. As you take the elder's foot, you notice resistance and he tells you, "I do not want to put on that shoe." You begin to persuade and try to convince him, "But, you will feel better putting on the shoe. The other shoe is already on your foot. We are going on a walk soon. The weather is nice, soon we will have lunch," and so forth. Nothing helps. The elder seems obstinate and could care less about the shoe missing on his right foot.

Various carepartners try as well, all to no avail. Until, finally, a volunteer who knows the elder well stops by and sits next to him. "Tom, how are you? Will you be watching the Warriors game tonight? How did you sleep last night? Any dreams?" The conversation continues, all the while the shoe needing to be put on is never mentioned. It had become irrelevant. More important to the volunteer was the personal connection she was making with the elder. When the volunteer is about to say goodbye to him she looks on the floor and notices how Tom was missing his shoe. "Hey, Tom, do you need any help putting on that shoe of yours?" Tom smiles at the volunteer and replies, "I guess that would be good. Bending down that far has become a bit difficult lately."

It is not about the shoe. It is first and foremost about establishing genuine contact, irrespective of whether the elder is forgetful, frail, bedridden, or just a bit older

than you. This approach requires an attitudinal shift in our orientation. It requires an understanding of the primacy of the relationship over the task at hand. We do so through starting any interaction first by being interested in and curious about relating to the emotional world of the person.