

Older adults may need assistance, but they don't need fixing

Tracey Siebert-Konopko, Guest Essayist Published 2:30 p.m. ET May 30, 2019



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World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEADD) is acknowledged annually on June 15. As a social worker, I have worked with survivors of elder abuse for over a decade – my entire professional career.

This experience has uniquely transformed my thoughts and feelings about aging and about older adults. Like many of my colleagues, I got into social work to make a difference, finding a niche in working with survivors of elder abuse. I was going to champion for the lost, fallen, and in-need. To enact social change and right the wrongs of society. The world was in black and white; you either needed help or you were the helper. I saw myself as the Superhero – She Who Would Fix It.

I was wrong.

What I have learned is that older adults, even those in difficult situations – poverty, ill health, elder abuse – don't need fixing. In my youthful privilege, I was blind to the wisdom and resiliency of those who came before me. I looked at my clients, some of whom had been in abusive situations their entire lives, cycles of violence that they'd endured and survived, as though I knew better than they. Now I know that I don't know better; and that it isn't my job to be their hero.

Rather, it's my job to walk beside them and to provide guidance (when requested) and support so that they may continue to practice those skills that have strengthened them over time.

One of the benefits of aging is an acquired knowledge base; a cerebral renaissance bolstered by a rich tapestry of experiences, both bad and good, that transform us into the person we will become. The flip-side of this, the Greek tragedy of it all is that it's often only after challenging experiences that we are able to achieve this clarity. Somewhere, Cassandra of Troy is saying a blanket, "I told you so."

This knowledge has influenced both my individual social work practice and my personal interactions. As my parents and grandmother age, I am constantly reminding myself to take a back seat to their choices. They're adults who deserve the dignity and have earned the right to make their own decisions, even if I may disagree with those decisions at times. The directive to "respect your elders" does not go on to say, "Only if you agree with them."

Elder abuse and mistreatment thrive in silence. Older adults may be embarrassed by the situation and feel powerless. They may be reluctant to reach out for help.

It is in these times that professional assistance may be necessary, but not to "fix" it. Rather, professional support and guidance to review options and walk with older survivors of abuse can help to break the silence and ensure that our older adults live with dignity and respect.

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