

ON AGING - WHAT DOES "INDEPENDENCE" REALLY MEAN?

By Donna Deos

Since it is July and we as a nation celebrate our Independence from England at this time, I thought it appropriate to look at what does Independence really mean when it comes to aging. In my years in the senior living industry I can tell you it has many different meanings or applications depending on who you are speaking with. It can be a very broadly used term for sure.

In "Independent Living" where I worked for the majority of my career, it truly meant that you were able to do most everything on your own. You could do all of your "Activities of Daily Living" also known as ADL's in the industry. These are: bathing, toileting, transferring (getting in and out of bed or a chair on your own), dressing, eating and ambulation (walking around, with or without assistive devices).

There is also another set of activities called IADLs, which are "Instrumental Activities of Daily Living" that include: managing finances, handling transportation (driving or navigating public transit), shopping, preparing meals, using the telephone and other communication devices, managing medications, housework and basic home maintenance. Sidebar: In my position I would explain this to the folks I was working with. Most of them fit the entire bill, some did not.

It is common in long term marriages [of persons in their 80's and above at least] that one person may handle the finances and the other the housekeeping or home maintenance or cooking. Some people never learn to drive or manage finances by their own choice and because they had no need to learn them. We took the position that just because you don't do it, doesn't mean that you can't or won't; and those particular items were not safety or personal care concerns so they were okay to have someone else handle for you. They were readily available in our community so they were of no concern regarding one's ability to live independently. If customers wished to tour our levels of care, we would certainly do that. This, by the way is a very important thing to do when evaluating options. I cannot stress enough that not all care is equal! You need to see it for yourself.

Okay, so we go to view the lev-



els of care and they naturally have questions, which I defer to the staff for that particular area as it is their area of expertise, not mine. I wish for my people to get the best information possible. Inevitably the staff of whatever level of care will say some version of "we have people with varying levels of independence here." This would blow my mind because to me it undermined what I had just told them, which is to move in initially they had to be independent. Now this well-meaning staff member would tell them people are independent everywhere. What?!

It took the black and white of my explanation and put colors, and subsequently confusion, in there. To an extent their statement is true. People do have varying levels of independence. When we look at all of those many items in the ADLs and IADL lists, it is possible that people do many of them on their own, but need assistance with others, so the staff members' statement is true from that respect. However, to be truly "Independent" wouldn't you need to be able to manage them all on your own? Well, ask yourself that question. Apply it to yourself or your aging loved ones. It's much harder to answer that way isn't it? Not so black and white after all. We want our loved ones to have what our loved ones want.

We all want to maintain our independence as best we can throughout our lives. We don't want our diminished abilities to mean we have lost or will lose our independence. Those of us who served our country through the military know full well how hard they fought for all of us to maintain our freedom and independence. To think that in

any way, shape or form that could or has changed is just unacceptable. So, we skew our view of "Independence" to what fits better and feels better for us in our current situation.

My own mother did this about staying in our family home. She was able to live independently in her mind because many things were taken care of for her. I know, because I was the one who took them on one by one as they became too challenging for her to do. I did it because I loved her and wanted her to have the lifestyle she wanted. There were many times when in a single day she would go from the view of "I'm living independently" to "you know, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be able to stay in this house." She was right...in both cases!

The same could be said for those on supportive services. Simply because they are receiving Government assistance and have become dependent on it, does that make them dependent people versus independent people? I leave you to ponder that one as well. If we go to such distances as creating entire industries based on enabling our aging loved ones to keep the feeling of independence by helping them to stay in their current homes, why do we not do that in other areas of need as well? Where do we draw the line? Okay, I digressed there, but I did it to get you thinking.

What truly is "Independence" in aging? When are we willing to change how we look at it and accept that we prefer to have the word independence as a vague interpretation to suit our egos and feelings versus the black and white term it initially seemed to be? Is all of this okay? Is it truly the best way to handle the issues of aging? If not, how and when do we change it? Where is the line drawn in the sand, if there is one drawn? Or do we keep on keeping on, putting systems in

place to enable people to do what it is they prefer rather than perhaps what would be better for them, and us, in the long run? We could take on the whole point of how our varying views on Independence affect the independence of those who love us and care for us and enable us to meet our view of independence at the cost of their own, but I won't do that here. I leave that for you to ponder.

As you value your own independence this July are you also valuing the independence of others? If not, don't you think perhaps you should?!

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