



New Study Looks at How Older Adults, Adult Children View Independent Living

The ability to live independently in one's own home is a number one priority of most older adults. Without independence, adults can feel cut off from family, friends and community activities.

A new national study from the American Association of Retired Persons -I (AARP), however, indicates that older adults and adult children view some aspects of independent living differently.

"While older adults and adult children define independent living in similar ways- as the ability to care for oneself without outside help - some of the ways in which parents and their children communicate about independence were different," says Mary Brintnall- Peterson, a University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist in aging.

The 1998 telephone survey of nearly 900 adults included older adults who were at least 65 years old who had at least one adult child over the age of 35, as well as adult children over the age of 35 who had parents at least 65 years old. The older adults and adult children were not from the same families.

The study found that three in 10 families have had conversations about independent living between the generations. Despite the lack of communication, the generations agree about the extent to which they have communicated with each other about independent living.

Families find that it is easier to have these conversations about independent living before any difficult decisions need to be made, and to have them within the context of discussions about planning for the future.

"Having conversations ahead of time are so essential because when a health crisis occurs family members are usually the first people to get involved," Brintnall-Peterson says.

"When adult children are aware of their parents' wishes and concerns, they can work on maintaining that independence as long as possible and look for community resources to support independence."

Older parents' desire to rely on family, friends, and neighbors as information sources is a fact of which adult children should be aware. The study found that older adults and adult children differed in their perceptions about giving and receiving information. Adult children were more likely to be willing to offer information, while older adults were less likely to ask for information from their children.

Yet, when older adults needed information, they turned to family, friends and neighbors.

Older adults and adult children also differed in their perceptions about the amount of help given. Adult children say they provide more help than older adults report receiving from their children. Older adults also are much less likely to report having experienced health care problems, compared with what adult children report.

Physical health problems were the number one issue older adults in the study identified as affecting their ability to live independently, followed by mental health problems, financial problems, and death of a spouse.

Older adults and adult children also differed in their perceptions about the amount of help given to older adults. Adult children said they had given more help than older adults perceived receiving. Older adults also were more likely to say they don't need any help to live independently.

"Even when older adults turn to family and friends for information, the adult children in the study say they didn't know where to get information," Brintnall-Peterson says.

Some sources of information for older adults in communities may include:

- Department of Aging in your county or tribe
- Senior centers
- Local hospital benefits counselors
- Nutrition sites
- County government
- Human Services Department
- County UW-Extension office

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