

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

The Danger of Isolation

Nesting is a common phenomenon of aging. It refers to burrowing in at home. The world shrinks to that one favorite chair in front of the television. Within reach are the TV remote, piles of old newspapers and magazines, snack food, and a coffee cup (and maybe a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of alcohol). Nesting is a sure sign that your loved one has become too isolated.

We're social animals. We need to be around others. A care-receiver who has become a hermit is in danger of developing a host of problems. Again, the maxim "Use it or lose it" is a helpful guide. A person who is mentally stimulated and challenged can think more clearly. A person who gets some physical exercise, who is out and about, feels better and sleeps more soundly at night. A person who is concerned about others, who feels he or she is making a contribution, is less self-absorbed. A person with basic social skills is going to pay attention to appearance and manners.

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Of course, sometimes there are very good reasons for sticking close to home. We all have our downtimes. It could be that your care-receiver has been sick. Maybe your loved one is recovering from surgery. But for some, it's not hard for that recuperative period to lead to an unhealthy isolation. You realize that your loved one used to belong to a parish guild or an altar society but now only attends Sunday Mass. She no longer takes the bus downtown for that once-a-month luncheon with friends. She only goes out to buy groceries, and she doesn't even want to do that.

Why does this happen? It might be that his closest friends have died and it's not easy to make new ones. Maybe he's concerned that mentally he's not as quick as he used to be. He forgets names. He gets confused when he's out of the house. Maybe she's hiding the fact that she's having trouble walking. Or that she is getting dizzy sometimes, or

having trouble controlling her bladder. Pride may be influencing the decision: "What will people think? I look terrible." Maybe your loved one is simply afraid. The news is filled with stories of violent crimes, and he or she can feel vulnerable. What can you do to help?

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--*Find out what community programs and activities are available.* Visit a local senior center with your father. Better still, make a visit with your care-receiver and take along a friend of his. Go on a tour. Have lunch there. Meet some of the other participants. Check the schedule and see what would be fun for him and his friend to do. Your local Senior Information and Assistance can help you find the nearest senior center.

--*Facilitate activities.* Offer to drive your mother to an afternoon recital or a movie matinee and then pick her up. Find out about bus schedules, cab rates, and senior van pools. Encourage your father to volunteer. Be on hand—as co-host and caterer—so Mom or Dad can have company over for lunch or coffee and cake.

--*Find out what's happening at the parish.* Help your loved one become more active there. Most likely a fellow parishioner is going to the prayer service, presentation, party, or meal and would be happy to act as chauffeur.

Don't expect things to turn around overnight. Correcting the problem of isolation, like becoming isolated, is a gradual process.

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For a free copy of "The Little Book of Caregiver Prayers," call the Friends of St. John the Caregiver at 1-800-392-JOHN (5646).

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