
Our Words Matter When a Senior Faces a Change in Autonomy

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Abstract:

So much bulldozing has been witnessed in the language that is used when helping seniors adapt at home, downsize, lightsize, and/or transition towards senior living. These are words that destroy confidence and breakdown conversations: “They have no choice”, “We will force them.”, “I’ll put my parents over there.”, “They have no other option.”, “We’ll shove them into making that decision.”, “We need to place them.”

These statements are painful to hear and it is clear that the words used trigger/activate emotions during every conversation for everyone around the table. This ultimately affects how closed people are to talking about aging and often leads to arms that are crossed in a crisp fashion over the chest, eyes lowered, with heels dug into to the ground, as the senior says: “They can take me feet first out of this place.”

A slight modification in the words we use when a senior faces new realities and adjusts to current needs can create a positive outcome, less guilt and shame for everyone involved, and can help offer more power to the senior who is at the core of the conversation.

Based on 26 years of qualitative field research in Canada, United States and Europe, this presentation, with a practical call to action, will bring light to the current language used and offer tools to provide more productive conversations that are beneficial to everyone involved. The goal is to invite change so that, as a community, we can create new best practices and teach one person at a time how a few words can make a huge difference when we guide our seniors when they face a delicate stage in life.

This field research is based on working along side seniors, their family, the senior living industry, paying attention to the language used in our media, the suggestions of the use of the words put and place in our dictionaries and from visiting privately run senior living option and or discusses aging wherever travel occurs around the world.