

Highly Commended: Frances Toomeh (NSW)

Reel the Line in

If I could line up all the cigarettes Dad had ever lit in a perfect line, maybe it would create a path that would lead me to a place no one in Dad's life had ever been. A place in his heart no one had ever felt. A place that bleeds for a stress-free life filled with endless laughs, good company and lots of energy. A place where one can see the finish line – unlike the rat race we live in today.

If only I could line up all the pills Dad needed to keep alive, maybe this would lead me to the thoughts in his mind and I would be one step closer in understanding his thoughts of worthlessness or helplessness. If only I didn't have to work, so I could constantly observe Dad's behaviour and understand why he has become so agitated in recent years and why all his day to day duties have become so exhausting.

I feel helpless when Dad walks around the house muttering "This life is empty". Some days I have no response to these words and soon begin to feel helpless and have feelings of guilt swim through the veins in my body and touch my heart like the blade of a butcher's knife. Other days, I choose to be strong and challenge him. I ask what exactly it is that triggers him to say words like this. Were the numerous amounts of medications interfering with his brain function? Had the stress of running his own business finally caught up with him? Or was it the fact that two of his four daughters were now married and had moved out of home, no longer being kept under his wing? Was Dad struggling to adapt to changes that were occurring in his life?

Perhaps there have been times in his life where it has been easier to reach out to a packet of cigarettes as opposed to a family member or friend. In Dad's eyes, reaching out would mean asking for help, and this would reflect weakness.

No matter how well things are going for you in life, if you sense someone close to you is troubled with themselves it can cause your world to come crashing down too. Days go by and you observe their behaviour. You try and understand what exactly triggers your loved one to be irritable and anxious. I had tried to think of ways to motivate my father, yet everything seemed like an exhausting task. His energy levels would fluctuate and so would his moods. It was these fluctuations that caused frustration and sadness within me.

There are those who love to talk; those who enjoy socialising; those who prefer to watch; and those who favour listening. My world was getting darker and the quality of my senses began deteriorating. I didn't feel like talking, I wasn't interested in watching, I felt numb to interact and I couldn't hear to listen. It was days like these where I tasted a dose of what my father had been feeling. Emptiness. Silence.

There remains the stigma and lack of understanding lurking around depression, particularly amongst the elderly. To reduce the stigma associated with depression and mental illness we need to implement strategies – provide services within our communities to establish strong support for older people who are living with late onset depression, and their carers.

From nappies to underwear, from kindergarten to university, from sandals to stilettos, these are some of the many transitions human beings experience as they age. At an early age we start building our core beliefs, creating thoughts, experiencing feelings of different intensities and behaving in a particular way. Parents put their lives on hold, work hard, make sacrifices, all to ensure that their children have the best education, the best set of morals and values, the best occupation. And the list goes on. Over the years, children, in turn, grow to be happy and healthy young adults, study hard, reach their goals and enter the workforce to become successful professionals. So it is thought. Seven a. m. starts, twelve-hour work days, increased responsibility. We enter the rat race.

In the fast-paced world we live in today, older people can often feel like a burden on their families and carers. They come to a point where they feel that being taken care of becomes a 'duty' to some. For carers, it may sometimes feel there are not enough hours in the day.

Dad telephones. I whisper "What's wrong?" not being able to comfortably talk in an intense workplace. He informs me he just wanted to see how I was going. I tell him I will phone him back in a minute for a quick chat. Twelve hours later I return the call, but Mum tells me Dad's fast asleep. It is important that we give the time to assist and hear the words of older people with depression. It could be keeping an older person company and talking about the simple things in life so that thoughts of loneliness, feeling invisible, hopelessness, can all be eliminated. To do this you don't necessarily need to have a degree in psychology. It can be motivating the person to take up a hobby or an interest, one they possibly had when they considered themselves "well" and "full of energy". An interest of some sort may also assist in giving older people purpose in life, regaining confidence, inner strength.

Stronger focus on physical, social/emotional and mental wellbeing will be the beginning of ensuring a healthier lifestyle. Carers becoming involved and asking open-ended questions may result in older people getting defensive and frustrated, however this should be encouraged, as in time, and with conversation, their level of progress in relation to how they are coping will be revealed.

Older people living with late onset depression can need assistance with day to day duties. If we 'break down' their day we can establish where most of their time is being spent. For example, often people feel they don't want to leave the house as they are too tired, so it might mean ensuring they take a walk outside, making or meeting friends in their nearby streets and local area. Change in sleep pattern can also affect one's mood. For example, it isn't healthy to sleep for sixteen hours a day. This in some cases might be an escape, an easy escape from reality for some. Older patients could need assistance in planning their daily routine.

Raise public awareness to recognise the past efforts and contributions of older Australians; they need to be acknowledged within our communities. This should be a good reason for members of the public to 'give back' to these individuals in this difficult stage of their life. What is mostly valued to these individuals will be time and inclusion in community activities/events. Even though some may not be computer or mobile phone savvy we can find alternative ways to communicate with the older group of Australians.

Moreover, maintaining positive relationships for older people is extremely important and plays a vital role in their lives. The relationship one has with one's spouse, children, relatives and friends can impact their mood and outlook on life. Any one of these relationships could need strengthening; however, older people need those on the other end they are reaching out to, to respond. Listening and taking the time out for those trying to communicate is essential. Carers and family members can assist by planning and setting goals: whether they are short- or long-term, that is daily, weekly or even yearly. Older people need some direction and positiveness so that they feel purpose in life, and encouragement to take control of their current situation if they have struggled to adapt to any change that has occurred in recent years that has been associated with feelings of loss, confusion and negativity.

Just as we use all our patience, strength and energy on a fishing reel to spool a line back onto the reel to bring a fish closer to us, so too this rule applies with older people amongst us struggling to cope with late onset depression. There will be obstacles, similar to those that the waves in the ocean create. However, we must be patient, keep our feet grounded, treat the line with care, and we will succeed in bringing our loved ones closer and bringing older people who feel neglected and lonely closer to our community.

To encourage older people to speak about experiencing late onset depression, regular forums in our communities need to be held whereby individuals feel they are not alone. Late onset depression is more than an ageing process or disruption of neurotransmitter function and so there remain grey areas we need to fish for so

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Late Onset Depression: Finding Answers for Older People and their Carers

that the line is tightened, but not snapped or tangled and, in time, together we can bring in the reel to reduce the incidence of this illness.