

EMBRACING AGING

FAMILIES FACING CHANGE

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction

Change and getting older is inevitable. So how can we make it the best it can be? In this documentary you'll meet six families and hear from experts and "wise ones" sharing their insights on aging, housing choices, facing illness, and cooperating as siblings in the care of aging parents. Residents of a cohousing community for those over 55 offer attractive alternatives for the aging years. For more background on the program and on aging issues, see www.EmbracingAging.com.

Objective:

As viewers see other people dealing with aging, and hear themselves and their families in the lives of the documentary participants, they will find new insights and models of communicating and making decisions on aging. Viewers will become more comfortable and equipped for their own aging.

Preparation:

Embracing Aging: Families Facing Change is 58-minutes long. The DVD includes additional content. You may choose to show the program in its entirety and then discuss or show it in segments during several sessions. Some sections are longer than others. Always preview the sections you plan to use before showing. Use the guide for discussion with families, small groups, religious education classes, workshops, conferences, support groups, and with geriatric professionals. Choose the questions that work best for your group.

Documentary Discussion

General questions before you start

1. Have you ever had to take the keys away from your parent? Or your spouse? How can we help each other make that decision at a responsible time? How can you get help if someone you know is not cooperating with efforts to stop their driving?
2. Share experiences in letting go of a beloved family member.
3. Was it hard for your parents to downsize? How do you think it will be for you?
4. Do you consider yourself old? Do you like it? Do you like the age you are? What milestone age was the most difficult to turn for you (30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90)?

PART 1

Harry Davis family

Harry Davis and his daughter and son-in-law, Rande and Robert Gedaliah, New York City, N.Y., adjust to Harry's aging and loss of his wife.

1. Many times children of aging parents think primarily of their parent's health and safety in making a move to smaller or health-related housing (assisted living, retirement apartment, etc.). What are the social ramifications of making such a move and how do they impact parents? How can you balance your need for your parent to be safe and taken care of, with his or her own independence?
2. The death of a spouse leaves one spouse alone and still needing companionship. How have your parents or others dealt with this? How can a parent feel happy again after, as this daughter says, "he lost the love of his life"?
3. What can you do if your parent feels like home health care providers are not needed, can't be afforded, or just hover over them?
4. As self-employed business partners, the son and daughter in this family suffered financial loss from lack of income while they helped their father find housing and adjust. How has helping an aging parent impacted your work? How can workplaces be more family-friendly for the latter years as well as the child-rearing years?
5. When did you first become aware that your parents needed help or were becoming dependent?

PART 2

Models of aging

1. How have you encountered the medical world in relation to the care of seniors?
2. Do you find medical people dismissing the needs of older adults, or being responsive and helpful? Or perhaps you have found the opposite: a medical system wanting to be overly-involved, ordering expensive tests and procedures at the end of life when it would be wiser to just let go. Discuss your experiences.
3. Have you encountered the "never get old" model—where people try to stay middle-aged the rest of their lives? What's good or bad with that model?
4. How do you feel about the leisure model—all play in retirement? Is there a difference when you're 65 or 85?
5. Do you know anyone who is bored to death in retirement? Why do you think that is and how do you want it to be for you?

6. Can you get excited about the prospect of playing dominos and working jigsaw puzzles in your aging years? Why or why not? What do you hope to do?
7. Do you know people who are busier in retirement than ever before? Why do you think that is and how do you want it to be for you?
8. How have you found yourself resisting or denying that you are aging?

PART 3

Loss of identity

1. Has retiring been difficult for you, your parents, or others you know? How and why?
2. How can you prepare for that change in identity during younger years?
3. How can volunteering bring new purpose?

PART 4

The Concepcion family

The Concepcion family, Beth in California and Vicente and Kalayaan in Virginia, manage long-distance care of their father/father-in-law, Vicente, Sr.

1. Have you observed first-hand, aging in other cultures? What did you learn from that experience? What about the varying cultures within a country (such as the U.S.)?
2. Do you think other cultures have more respect for older people? Name some. Are there places where there is less respect than we have in North America?
3. If you are in a situation of helping long distance with the care of your parents, what are the challenges of that? How do you deal with them? How can you make it work? What is helpful?
4. How can you model a healthy time of growing older for your kids?
5. The Concepcions say that in the Philippine culture children consider it a privilege to care for their aging parents. Do you think that is true in North America? Why or why not and is there any way to work at that in families?

PART 5

The Phillips family

Marci Berstein, Los Angeles, Calif., fought a medical system which had given up on her mother, Shirley Phillips, at the age of 74.

1. Do you think it is true that baby boomers don't care about taking care of their parents? What evidence do you see to support your view?
2. How do you cope with raised eyebrows about the way you have handled your parent's aging?
3. Where is the balance between providing medical supports that are helpful and needed and those that become intrusive?
4. Do you have a medical power of attorney appointed, and does your family know your wishes in regards to end of life questions?
5. Marci moved her mother from one nursing home to a closer assisted-living facility, in part because the distance was destroying her own health. What would you do in a similar situation?
6. How can you help a parent adjust to a living situation they didn't ask for?

PART 6

Aging in place

1. What programs are there in your community to keep the option alive of staying in one's own home during the later years? Could your community be doing better? Discuss follow-up action if interested.
2. What can communities do about the loneliness and isolation of older people?

PART 7

The Guengerich family

Paul and Marjorie Guengerich, Harrisonburg, Va., and their adult children faced a series of downsizing moves while physical needs increased.

1. Do you feel old? When and what brought that feeling? Or discuss it hypothetically: I think I will feel old when ...
2. Adult children often see their parents' needs before they do. Has this happened for you? Share and discuss.
3. Stella Mora Henry says that we get into caregiving before we even realize it. Is this true? Share your experiences.
4. The world of elderly people becomes increasingly smaller. How can people adjust to that?

5. How can you help parents cope with the grief of moving to ever smaller places?
6. Do you see yourself in your parents and the way they react to changes? How can your gifts and natural skills serve you in the retirement years or as you cope with changes?
7. The biggest fear for the Guengeriches was being separated by different physical needs. What are your biggest fears in aging?
8. How do you respond when a parent says “it would just be better if we were dead” or “we hate to be a burden.”
9. Have you experienced role reversal with your parents? How did you both respond?
10. Why do boomers have a difficult time talking about their aging with their own children?
11. There are no handbooks or ways to tell you what lies ahead for you and your parents. “We live one day at a time,” said Susan, referring to taking care of her in-laws. How is that biblical? Later in the program Marjorie says it is difficult to not be anxious: name some of the lessons that can be learned in the later years.

PART 8 **The Durkee** **family**

The Bob Durkee family, Tunbridge, Vt., with daughters Barbara and Janet and son John, cooperate in caregiving for a mother with Alzheimer’s and a father with chronic leukemia.

1. How can you encourage more young people to go into various aspects of geriatric medicine?
2. Why is so little emphasis put on geriatrics in normal medical training?
3. The benefits of patient and family-centered care seem obvious. What are the drawbacks?
4. Stella Mora Henry says that almost half of persons who reach the age of 85 will have Alzheimer’s. How can families face this reality?
5. What support systems are in place in your community to help families caring for someone with Alzheimer’s?
6. What has been the hardest thing about your own parent’s aging, or your own?

7. Discuss the statement: "I don't know how people do it [care for a parent] if they're an only child." Have you seen families where this was the case, and both parents became sick?
8. Talk about the ways siblings seem to naturally divide responsibilities. How can you keep one from shouldering an unfair portion of the responsibilities? How can you talk about your different perceptions about "who is doing the most?" What can you do if you live at a distance?
9. How can grandchildren be involved in the life of a grandparent with a serious terminal illness?
10. What can you do if children don't want to visit someone in a nursing home?
11. How can you still provide care even if your parent is in a nursing home?

PART 9 **ElderSpirit** **cohousing**

ElderSpirit cohousing community members and founder Dene Peterson, Abingdon, Va., share their experiment in finding new alternatives in housing and growing old together.

1. Does cohousing sound attractive to you?
2. Most decisions are made by consensus in this particular community. How do you respond to that?
3. How do you feel about continuing-care communities? Is that an attractive option for you?
4. How can we ensure that people have affordable places to live?
5. Do you like the idea of living in a community of older people? What is good about that and what are the drawbacks?

PART 10 **Faith journey**

1. How does your faith impact your aging journey?
2. Does faith in God help? Are you ever angry with God about the losses of the elder years, or about the difficulties you encounter in helping your parents?
3. How can you be positive and hopeful about your later years?
4. Do you feel responsible for the frail elders in your church or community?
5. How could your church be more helpful?

Wrap Up

1. How can we make aging the best it can be?
2. What freedoms do you expect to gain in your latter years?
3. How can you actually work at becoming wise?
4. How can we tap the wisdom of older people?
5. Do you agree that it is a great time to be getting older? Why or why not?
6. What have you learned? What have been the benefits of providing care for an aging relative?
7. Have you promised someone to “never put them in a nursing home”? Why should persons be wary of making that promise, and what can you do if you are finding that you can’t keep that promise?
8. Will boomers do any better at facing signs of mortality and aging?
9. Have you put in place plans that will enable the next generation to make responsible and loving decisions about your care?
10. Can society find alternate/less expensive/more dignified/less isolated ways to care for all the elderly needing care in the years ahead?

Bonus content

Don’t miss the bonus content available on the DVD. Topics include: How to choose a nursing home, giving up driving, finances of older years, and more on cohousing.

Companion resources on aging

Beyond the News: Facing Death (DVD) — Families telling stories dealing with end of life plus planning a funeral, hospice care, and talking to children about cancer & death.

Dying Well: The Prospect for Growth at the End of Life by Dr. Ira Byock, a guide to dealing with becoming dependent, caring for others, and preparing for a satisfying end.

The Eldercare Handbook — Comprehensive and down-to-earth guide on what to expect and look for when seeking long-term care for a parent. By Stella Mora Henry, RN, eldercare specialist and co-founder of Vista del Sol Care Center. (This book is also available in Spanish.)

“A Loving Legacy” — Pamphlet created by author and Mennonite Media staffer Melodie Davis to help you and your family discuss and decide on family-related issues in the aging years.

Reinventing Aging book and DVD — A complete curriculum (13 weeks) on aging from Mennonite Media and Herald Press with DVD supplement and intergenerational study guide. (Book sold separately but DVD does not stand on its own.)

Websites

Visit the companion website www.EmbracingAging.com for more information on people and experts in the video, quotes, articles about aging, links, and much more.

Visit the websites of organizations mentioned in this documentary:

- www.AARP.org – AARP
- www.dartmouth-hitchcock.org – *Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center*
- www.ElderSpirit.net – *ElderSpirit Community*
- www.MennoniteMission.net/Work/Service/SOOP/Default.asp – *Service Opportunities for Older Adults through Mennonite Mission Network*
- www.vcnyc.org/ – *Village Care of New York*
- www.vistadelsolecare.org – *Vista del Sol Health Care Services*

Embracing Aging: Families Facing Change is one in a series of social commentary documentaries with a faith perspective produced by Mennonite Media for national television. Other documentaries in the series include:

Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide
Shadow Voices: Finding Hope in Mental Illness
Finding Hope in Recovery: Families Living With Addiction

For more information go to www.mennomedia.org or visit the websites by the same title.

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