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Wheelchairs Can Set You Free, If You Use Them

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It's pretty obvious that if you can't walk or can't keep up with people who do, you should use a wheelchair or similar assistive device, right? Apparently not to lots of people who hobble along with or without the help of a cane or who decide it's not that important to leave home. Even smart people can be like this, to the great distress of those who would like to go out with them to restaurants or parks or movies or concerts without a painfully slow walk to get there. "Just get in a wheelchair," I've said under my breath many times, not really understanding the psychological barrier to accepting the need for help.

People who refuse to use wheelchairs when they need them have been a pet peeve of mine for many years. It began with my father. For the last 10 years of his life he needed a wheelchair, but he almost always refused to sit in it. Instead he used it like a walker and piled things he wanted to move from room to room on the seat. He stopped going out except to doctors, and it was more than a little distressing to my mother not to be able to go places with him. She learned to go on her own or with friends, but she would have preferred to share many of these experiences with him.

Now walking has become difficult for me. As a result, I have more than an intellectual understanding of how psychologically difficult it can be to use an assistive device like a wheelchair. If I'm any example, needing help is a real blow to one's sense of autonomy, to one's sense of pride, to one's sense of self as a grown-up.

In my case the problem is exceedingly poor balance and not a little pain. I've used a cane for some time to keep from falling. No big deal for me, although it is for some people. With the cane, I could manage to walk about as much as I usually did -- two to three miles a day, sometimes more. Moreover, I actually look a bit dapper with a cane; and I've enjoyed it when, on rare occasion, people get up and give me a seat. (What is it about young people these days who don't automatically give up their seats to people with disabilities, pregnant women or to people like me who are just visibly old and wobbly?)

A couple of months ago, walking got more difficult. I stumbled more often, my legs gave out from time to time, I fell a few times. I began to grab walls or furniture or even people when I tilted off balance. Walking a few blocks even very slowly became a challenge.

I started physical therapy. After a few sessions without regaining stability, the therapist told me I needed a walker to avoid falling.

A walker!!! I'm not young, close to 70, but a walker? Good grief. I know that [falls are a major cause of disability and premature mortality](#) in old age, but I delayed getting it.

Then my wife and I had to fly to Houston where our niece was near death. She urged me to use a wheelchair at the airport. Ok, ok. I didn't want to be annoying like my father, so I agreed. There were others also taking advantage of this service, so it felt normal enough. But when we arrived at the hospital for our visit and my son-in-law asked if I'd like him to push me in a wheelchair, I felt deeply embarrassed. I could have managed, but not without slowing everyone down. I accepted reluctantly.

Now I have reluctantly bought a walker on wheels -- one of those spiffy ones with hand brakes and a seat. I can walk at a reasonable pace again. But I don't like it. People are feeling sorry for me, right? I look like I'm on my last legs, right? I know it's stupid, but that's the way it feels.

In truth, I am now far freer and safer than when I could only walk slowly and painfully with a cane. Of course, getting the walker in and out of a car or up and down stairs is always a nuisance and sometimes an insurmountable problem. But, on balance, using the walker has made my life better -- albeit at a psychological cost.

What's the moral of the story?

A few months ago, I overheard a nurse on the assisted living unit where my 97-year-old mother lives tell her, "Sylvia, use a walker." I could feel my mother cringe and bristle, and I heard her snap back, "Thanks for the suggestion, dear." My mother, who helped others her whole life, is not about to admit -- even to herself -- that she needs help.

So, one moral of the story is for caregivers. Don't think the people you are caring for are going to take your advice about wheelchairs or other assistive devices just because any rational person can see that they need them. We humans are not that rational. You often need to use motivating tactics to get people to go along with rational suggestions. (Here's [an article that may be helpful](#).)

Another moral of the story is for young, middle-aged and even elderly people who do not have disabilities. Sure, now you're fine. But be ready. Prepare your mind for the moment when you will have to be rational about needing help. It won't be easy.

And a final moral of the story is for older people like me who just can't stand it when we lose some of our autonomy. Get over it! Get in your wheelchairs. They can set you free!