

Aging Lifestyles: Nasty fall results in helpful ideas

by Joe_Volz

We won't soon forget the first snowfall of the season this year.

Snow fell all day and night, creating an arctic scene in early December. When my wife, Kate, went out in the backyard to put our cats on their leashes, a requirement of our homeowners' association, her feet slipped on the ice and she went crashing down, landing hard on her elbow.

Kate's a stubborn woman, and despite her pain and my entreaties, she refused to go to see the doctor.

"I'm sure it's not broken," insisted Kate.

She was wrong. Four days later, with the pain barely diminished, her arm black and blue, she agreed to get medical attention. One X-ray later, she was fitted with a sling and told to keep that broken arm as still as possible for the three to six weeks.

Since the fall we've been learning to adjust. Kate's finding, to her surprise, that she can get lots done using just one hand. Fortunately she smashed her left arm and not the one she uses all the time.

She can get dressed fairly well - but only if she forgoes some "essential" items, which is fine with me.

Trying to get her wounded arm into a sleeve, though, is minor torture. Even when I help, there's no way to do it without twinges. She's learning to grin and bear it. Driving is out of the question for her. This is probably the thing about her disability that Kate hates most. She likes to come and go as she pleases. Now she's chained to my itinerary.

Of course it goes without saying that I will defer to her wishes, putting her schedule ahead of mine.

One day while I was out Kate wanted to open a soda bottle. Even using a rubber helper she couldn't do it. Being forced to wait for me to return improved her temper no end.

The experience has us considering the plight of any older person whose upper body is out of action or who has to manage with arthritis or osteoporosis. Here are some obstacles she has encountered and ways to overcome them:

- Heavy plastic wrapping. It's ubiquitous, covering everything from blueberries to razors to toothbrushes. Those who invented these torture devices should hire their grandmothers as consultants. The easiest solution is to avoid buying anything wrapped in heavy plastic. Or you can wait and ask a relative or neighbor for help.

- Bottle caps. Childproof caps are prevalent on prescription bottles; these are hard even for many able-bodied people. Ask your pharmacist to put a notice in your file that reads "no childproof tops." When you pick up medicines, check to see if the right cap is on the bottle.

- Wine bottles. Make sure you buy only wines with screw caps instead of corks.

Clothes and shoes. These are particularly thorny problems with no easy answers. But there are some things to do. Start by trying to wear only your largest clothes. Or borrow some large shirts from your mate, son or other relative. They are much easier to put on.

If you don't already have shoes that close with Velcro, it is worth buying a cheap pair at a discount store. Slip-on shoes are another option. Wearing slippers all day probably is the worst solution as many are not slip-proof. And throw away your flip-flops.

Another route for finding solutions to limited mobility is to buy inexpensive devices that can make your life easier. Start with a visit to a medical devices section in your drugstore. If you strike out there, then try a medical devices and aids store. Look in your phone book for one close to you.

Or use the Internet. On the computer screen, type in "older people disability devices" and press "search." A slew of companies' and organizations' Web addresses will come up.

Disability Products, for one example, has items to use with one hand, such as a Swedish cutting board with a vise and spikes to hold fruit and vegetables in place and a bread-spread board with plastic guards to secure the food for \$12. You can contact them directly at www.disabilityproducts.com; 5447 E. Elmwood St., Mesa, AZ 85205; 800-688-4576.

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