

Will Baby Boomers Be Any Different?

By PAULA SPAN

The New York Times Attendees at the Woodstock rock festival in 1969. In the coming decades, the baby boomer generation may grapple with old age in novel ways.

Raise your hand if your elderly parents issue one of the following proclamations whenever you try to persuade them to accept some sort of assistance — wearing an emergency-response pendant, say, or hiring a home care aide, or moving into assisted living when remaining at home becomes too difficult to manage.

- 1) “It’s too expensive” — though you know they could afford it.
- 2) “I can manage on my own” — though a history of falls, missed medications and poor nutrition suggests otherwise.
- 3) “I don’t want a stranger in my house.”
- 4) “The only way I’m leaving here is feet first.”

Not every elderly person needs help, and not every elderly person who needs it resists it. But the No. 1 question I encounter when I speak to family caregivers is how to cajole old people into adapting to increasing disability when they are, to be a tad euphemistic, “fiercely independent.” (Insert that line about the river in Egypt here.)

It makes me wonder how much of this apparently widespread intransigence has to do with a particular cohort — anyone over 80 was shaped by the Depression, whether they were old enough to remember it or not — and how much of it is intrinsic to aging itself.

In 20 or so years, when we baby boomers enter the ranks of the “old-old” ourselves, will we be any different?

I vote yes, in certain important ways. We are, for example, much more accustomed to paying people — from house cleaners to personal trainers — to help in all sorts of ways, so I doubt we’ll suffer as much angst about hiring home care aides or geriatric care managers or drivers. (How we’ll pay for it is another matter.)

“We’ll see more seniors coming directly to us for help in the next 10 years, versus the past 10 when it was a daughter or son calling us and tearing their hair out,” predicted Paul Hogan, who as chief executive of Home Instead Senior Care, the country’s largest network of home care franchises, has a major stake in this matter.

With the Depression generation, Mr. Hogan told me, agreeing to home care “takes a doctor’s ultimatum: ‘You’re not going home from the hospital unless you get help, because you’ll break that other hip.’” But Mr. Hogan’s own mother, a businesswoman in her 70s, has long paid financial advisers, child care workers and housekeepers. “She sees getting help when she’s older as just another in the long line of services she’s taken advantage of throughout her career,” Mr. Hogan reported.

In fact, we’ll probably have to accept hired help. As a generation, we’ve had far fewer children than our parents, and we’re less likely to be married. Even if we prefer to rely on unpaid care when we’re sick or frail, our smaller families may be stretched too thin to provide it.

Moreover, we’re not as cheap. Every month, my father and his neighbor mail in their credit card payments in a single envelope, thus achieving savings of \$2.64 a year each in postage.

Boomers are another story. “Our generational ethos is personal gratification,” said Matt Thornhill, president of the Boomer Project, a market research firm in Richmond. “We have a much different attitude about spending money.” Of course, that ethos also means we hadn’t saved enough for retirement, even before the Great Recession. (Insert grim joke about 201K’s here.) But if we have enough money, we’re less likely to agonize about spending it on something as essential as personal care.

In other ways, though, we may drive our children just as crazy. Take the question of moving. “Previous older generations started and embraced the age-restricted retirement community,” like Sun City, or the 55-plus condo complexes that carpet so many suburbs, Mr. Thornhill pointed out.

For boomers, though, “the concept of reaching a certain age, leaving work, and disengaging from our lives and social networks is anathema,” he continued. “We get a lot of our self-fulfillment from work – and we’re going to need the income,” Mr. Thornhill said. So we may not be so amenable to leaving our homes, either — or giving up our cars.

I think. We’re all speculating, because the fact is that as a society and as individuals, we’re facing unprecedented longevity, and nobody quite knows how these changes will play out. Perhaps we’ll be just as unwilling to acknowledge infirmity, just as stubborn about defying our children’s entreaties.

Mr. Thornhill thinks otherwise, though. Would his father have embraced a gizmo like an iPod? No, that sort of thing was for kids. But Mr. Thornhill, a boomer himself, has one.

“The reputation of older people is that they get stuck in their ways,” he mused. But that may not pertain to boomers. “We’ve always been so adaptive. Life for us has been change.”

Paula Span is the author of “When the Time Comes: Families With Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions.