

Comfort, safety edge out vanity as we age

I was at the eye doctor recently complaining about my difficulties with night driving, specifically the huge starburst effect of oncoming headlights. This is disconcerting on a variety of levels.

First, there is the curtailment of some evening activities. Being a pretty dedicated homebody, this isn't a significant blow to my social life except that my choice of whether to go out after dark is now being decided by my eyes.

Secondly, trouble with night driving is really an elderly person's problem, right? How can I have this affliction? I did not expect this to happen for at least 10 years. And what's worse, my options of fixing the problem are limited. I must come to the terms with the fact that my potential of being footloose and fancy free, at least at night, is a thing of the past.

The diagnosis is cataracts. They are large enough to be limiting but too small to be addressed surgically. So where does that leave my night driving?

My optometrist suggested glasses with a unique look. They are plastic, wrap-around frames with yellow lenses that slip over

the regular glasses. The yellow lens is supposed to soften the starburst effect. Sounds good.

But then she said something thought-provoking: Sometimes people don't want to wear them because of fear they will look funny. But, she countered in the same breath, it doesn't really matter because it will be dark and who can really see you in the car.

As I contemplated this, it dawned on me. Aging is a trade-off. My night vision is suffering, true. But my comfort in my own skin is at an all-time high.

At age 30, I had an eagle eye. Tiny print, bad light, bright light, none of it mattered. However, I would not have been caught dead in those funny yellow glasses. Good grief, what if someone saw me? It was all about image and how I was perceived by the world.

Fast forwarding about 25 years, I embrace the notion that what other people think of me is none of my business. I truly don't care. What really matters is how I feel about myself. I put my order in for the glasses.

There may be costs associated with aging, but the freedom that comes with deep-seated self-confidence is priceless.

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CAROL HIGGINS TAYLOR

Dementia

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venture. After a time, a shadowy figure emerges out of nowhere and takes me firmly by the elbow. "You're doing just fine," a voice shouts above the din in my ears. That's a lie, I think, with some irritation. Still, it is comforting to know someone is paying attention. I am led further into the room, and then again I am alone.

I stumble against another table, smaller than the first. My clumsy fingers pick up a long, narrow object. A pen? To write a note to my family? I search for the ink tip or for a cap to pull off. Nothing. A siren begins wailing in my ear. I turn over the object and realize it's a toothbrush. Was brushing my teeth one of my tasks? I find a tube of something on the table and assume it's toothpaste. I squeeze some onto the brush, somewhere near where the bristles must be, then think better of the whole idea. There's no cup of water, for one thing, and where would I spit, and who else has used that toothbrush?

"Where is that sweater?" The echoing voice is mine, amplified somehow by the headset. The sweater's existence is one thing in this weird netherworld I feel certain of. I find myself standing over a bed. Faintly, I see a blurred scattering of light-colored cloth on the dark coverlet. Is there a sweater here? I identify a tee shirt, some neckties, socks. Some small hand towels. No sweater. There's a blast of noise in my ear like a car crash. I wander away, then come back and fold the towels. It's something I know how to do. I am pretty sure it was on the list.

On the other side of the room, I bump into yet another table. My eyes make out a flat, white rectangle of paper. I find the pen. I haven't really thought about what to say in my note. In the dark, here's what comes out, in big, misshapen letters:

"I am very confused. I can't find my sweater. The room is so dark. I don't know what to do next. Love, Mom"

I write the short sentences deliberately, a little bit theatrically. But, even as I form them, I can too easily imagine writing them in desperation, fury, despair.

I don't know what to do next. Where the hell is the sweater?



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Island Nursing Home and Care Center data coordinator Becky Siebert explains the Virtual Dementia Tour at the facility.

I grope in the strobing darkness for a few more minutes, frustration building in me. How much longer do I have to do this? I am grateful when a firm hand takes my elbow and steers me to the doorway.

Back out in the bright hallway, it is a relief to lift that noisy headset off my ears. I stand up tall, laughing and confident as I pull off the goggles, peel off the gloves and remove the lumpy inserts from my shoes. I was fumbling in the dark for about 10 minutes. Glad that's over.

But for people with dementia, it is never over. It only gets worse, and it can last for years.

Becky Siebert, a longtime nurse and care coordinator at The Island Nursing Home and Care Center, says that about 85 percent of the residents there suffer from Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. Until recently, staff have not had the tools to understand what life is like for those residents.

Now, every employee of the facility is required to take the Virtual Dementia Tour, with a goal of improving the care provided to the residents.

Of course, no one really knows what goes on inside the head of someone with dementia, and no simple, 10-minute experience can tell us that. Outward manifestations are easier to see and can include a shuffling gait, forgetfulness, obsessive behavior, distractibility, inability to complete familiar tasks, talking to oneself, timidity and bursts of anger.

"We see that people who go through this short training often exhibit behaviors associated with dementia themselves," Siebert says. The experience helps caregivers, both family members and professional staff, understand some basic guidelines, she says.

Slow down. Speak clearly. Be patient. Use simple sentences. Minimize outside noise. Organize rooms for light, simplicity and safety. Give plenty of guidance.

Since introducing the dementia training, the nursing facility has stopped piping music through its overhead system. The facility also no longer makes overhead announcements and provides plenty of space away from foot traffic, television or other unneeded stimulation. Home caregivers can take some of the same measures.

Cognitive changes associated with dementia include memory loss, difficulty communicating, difficulty with simple and complex tasks, difficulty with planning and organizing, loss of coordination and problems with orientation. Psychological changes may include personality changes, inability to reason, paranoia, agitation and hallucinations.

Symptoms typically worsen over time. People with advanced forms of dementia often develop infections, malnutrition and injuries related to falls.

The incidence of all forms of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, is poised to skyrocket as baby boomers age. Right now, according to the Alzheimer's Association, 5.3 million Americans are living with the diagnosis, including one of every nine Americans over the age of 65. One-third of Americans over the age of 85 are afflicted. By 2050, unless a cure is found, a projected 16 million Americans will have Alzheimer's.

"We are not prepared for this pandemic," Siebert said. "We need to prepare. If people understand dementia, they'll be better caregivers."

The Virtual Dementia Tour program is available to organizations and facilities through the nonprofit organization Second Wind Dreams. Families who choose to care for their loved ones with dementia at home can find training, support and other resources through a number of organizations, including the Alzheimer's Association, AARP and, in Maine, the five regional agencies on aging.



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Hampden residents Susan Gallant (right) and her husband, John, with their yellow Labrador retriever, Bubba. The Gallants adopted Bubba from the Bangor Humane Society in July.

Dogs

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time as possible getting to know them."

At the Bangor Humane Society, Stacey Coventry said finding the right match is key to a happy adoption. An older dog or one with separation anxiety will generally do well in a home where there isn't a lot of coming and going, for example, while an rambunctious younger dog is a good choice for a more active owner.

Cost can be another important consideration for

older dog-owners, Coventry said, including food, grooming and veterinary care.

"We try to get people to think about it rationally, not just with their hearts," she said.

But Coventry said there's no reason an energetic older adopter such as Gallant, who has the support of her husband and adult children as well as an appropriate home setting, shouldn't adopt a big dog such as Bubba.

"He has no issues and no bad habits," Coventry said. "If you really fall in love with an 85-pound Lab, we would never tell you you shouldn't have that dog."

Gallant couldn't agree more.

"My daughter told me not to pass up the right dog just because it was big,"

she said with a chuckle. "I was trying to turn myself into a small-dog person, and I ended up with a horse."

Noonan

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nately, the standard treatments have numerous side effects, and the longer they are used, the more serious the side effects become.

The goal of all these treatments is the same: to allow

the patient to resume an active, pain free lifestyle. But the more aggressive treatments should be saved for cases that prove resistant to wellness care. And once a patient can be more active, their health can improve with time, rather than worsen with inactivity.

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Haskell

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tics or other criteria. Some I recognized from my social and professional circles and skipped in order to avoid weirdness.

But others I lingered over, wondering about their stories, what brought them to this point in their lives and whether they might have enough of whatever it was I needed to build a relationship on.

I wasn't ready to reach out to anyone yet, but it was reassuring to realize there were some roses among these thorns, some princes among the toads.

Of course, at the same time I was beginning to get the hang of this online thing, my own profile was also available for anyone on Match to see and being included in the "Your Daily Five" listings emailed to goodness-only-knows how many men. No doubt scores of them passed me right by without a second glance and with good cause — I am not everyone's dish of tea, that's for sure.

But I did start getting emails from men who seemed like reasonably good matches for me. Before long, I was responding — tentatively and cautiously — at first but with growing confidence in my own judgment and in the Match.com system, which gave me complete

control over whom I communicated with, how often and when, if ever, I chose to connect in person.

Meg Haskell writes for and about the baby boom generation in Maine. She can be reached by email at mhaskell@bangordailynews.com.

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