

What comes to mind when you hear the words “elderly people”? The common stereotypes of them are that they are short, slow walking, with gray hair and lots of wrinkles. I used to think the same.

When we’re young, our parents and teachers always tell us to “respect your elders.” They are old, so you have to take care of them. You shouldn’t raise your voice around them. You need to give them your seat on the train. Is this truly showing the elderly respect? I thought I was being respectful but at the same time viewed them as being weaker than me. However, when I saw my grandmother’s actions during my grandfather’s hospital admittance, I suddenly realized that my attitude wasn’t respectful at all. I was just being polite to them. Through this experience I realized the true meaning of respect.

This spring, my grandfather was suddenly admitted to hospital because of a sigmoid colon perforation in his large intestine. My family couldn’t understand why my grandfather, such an active and powerful man, got sick so suddenly and were very worried about him. All I could do was wait and pray while he wandered between life and death. Thankfully, his operation was a success.

From the beginning, I was very impressed by my grandmother’s dedicated support. She went to the hospital every day to see him. And even though she should hate grotesque things like blood, she was able to assist with changing his colostomy bag with no problem. I asked her how she could act like this and she replied, “We are in a three-legged race.” This means that because they’re husband and wife, they’re joined in life and always support each other, whatever happens.

This was the time when I began to understand and appreciate my grandmother’s mental strength. I knew she was worried about him the most, but she remained calm, putting his needs first. She is elderly, but her heart and mentality are still strong. Her mental strength is far stronger than mine. After that, I looked at her differently and began to talk with her more often; asking questions and for advice. I realized that her opinions totally had value; they were new and strong. This could be said about other elderly people, too. They look old but their opinions still have value today. They shouldn’t be dismissed as being feeble.

In the Netherlands, there is a knitwear brand called “Granny’s Finest.” All the commodities are made by grandmothers who are good at knitting and they collaborate with young designers. It provides these women with income, independence and purpose. At the same time, educating young designers knitting techniques and skills.

These programs should be done in Japan, too. Nowadays, our aging society has been growing so fast, but just because people are getting older, it doesn’t mean they should be viewed as no longer active and without value. There are some volunteer activities, such as Neighborhood Watch, in my city. These programs are good but there’s little communication between elders and young people. Also, they don’t use skills which they have accumulated during their careers. There should be more opportunities where they can use their skills to affect the community.

We shouldn’t have assumptions that because the elderly look old, that their minds aren’t sharp. They have a lifetime of experience to share. We should listen, learn, collaborate and appreciate what they have to offer us. Don’t forget their value.