



The conflicting images of old age: Old man (left) alone with his thoughts and poverty; Boston Pops Conductor Arthur Fiedler, at 80, rehearsing young members of the Boston Ballet Company.

Old age: The burden, myth of self-sufficiency

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fifth of 16 articles in the series "Moral Choices in Contemporary Society." The series was prepared for Courses by Newspaper by University Extension of University of California at San Diego. The series is the text for an Oakland University credit course. Copyright 1977 by the Regents of the University of California.

By DANIEL CALLAHAN

To one who recently reached the advanced age of 46, the rapidly approaching prospect of old age is both entrancing and terrifying.

My children will be grown; my life will once again be my own. That is encouraging.

But I am not altogether reassured by some of the elderly people I see around me who spend a good deal of their extra leisure visiting hospitals, going to the funerals of old friends, and restlessly looking for something to do with idle time.

That's if one is doing relatively well.

Many of the elderly are in nursing homes, those cunning institutions created to make certain that the elderly are not under foot around the house. The prospect that I might end my days in one of the places—staring at walls or ever-blaring television sets—terrifies me, but only slightly more than the prospect of aging itself.

I AM ALSO puzzled. History has delivered at least two conflicting images of old age. There is the image of lost youth, declining power, creeping decay and a final, lonely passion.

There is also the image of a crowning culmination of life, respect and honor, the loving circle of one's grown children with their children, and a peaceful death enhanced by the knowledge that a full and worthy life has been lived.

No doubt both images are true. Yet no one has satisfactorily explained to me why some of the aging realize one image and some the other.

One thing now seems certain, however: Slowly but surely we are almost guaranteeing that old age will be, if not outright misery (which will be the lot of many), then loneliness, poverty and isolation.

MODERN MEDICINE must share part of the blame. It has become increasingly ingenious at keeping people alive, but has proven singularly unable to do anything about the kinds of lives people live.

If the gift of life is another 10 years in a nursing home, is that pure gain? Is life on a machine a benefit? Or consider the job market.

Perhaps it is reasonable that the elderly should be forced into retirement at a certain age and that youth should be given their chance to take over.

But that is a very different matter from the other message our culture also delivers: If one is not a "productive"—that is, a money-making—member of society, then one is a pure liability.

THOSE FAMILIAR complaints, however, do not get to the bottom of the matter.

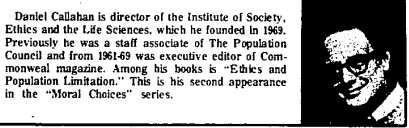
The problem of age for me is summed up in a phrase I have heard people, including the elderly, utter ever since I was a child: "I don't want to be a burden on my children."

What an understandable and yet, at the same time, strange thing to say! It is understandable because the prospect of helplessness and dependency is part of the fearful image of old age. It is also very strange. Those same children upon whom one does not want to become dependent are the very ones who were for so long dependent upon the parents.

If children need parents for 18 or even 20 years—for their life, their food, their housing, their education—why should it seem so wrong for children to take up the burden of caring for their parents when the latter's time of need and dependency has come?

It seems a matter of simple justice and reciprocity, a point well-recognized by older cultures, which would have the older generation, which would have been the source of support for their parents, in turn be supported by their children.

That's why that the elderly themselves say they do not want to be dependent on their children does not surprise me, nor sadden me.



Daniel Callahan is director of the Institute of Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences, which he founded in 1969. Previously he was a staff associate of The Population Council and from 1961-69 was executive editor of Commonweal magazine. Among his books is "Ethics and Population Limitation." This is his second appearance in the "Moral Choices" series.

The root of the evil is the equally strange notion that everyone should be dependent upon himself alone. It is a heady, but wholly false, myth. No one is wholly self-dependent, not as a child, not as an adult, not as an old person.

That we should try to be our own person, have our own ideas and maintain some direction over our own lives is a very different matter from being self-sufficient.

We need other people, not just because someone has to erow the food we eat, build the houses we live in or print the books we read, but because we cannot even realize our human potential without the company and pleasure of others. What good is language if we have no one to talk with?

MORAL CHOICES
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Economically, it is impossible in fact for most people to achieve self-sufficiency. Having given up dependence upon family and kin, we are now dependent upon Social Security, Medicare or the capricious charity of the state.

Emotionally, it is hardly more possible to be self-sufficient. I have seen all those independent souls sitting listlessly on park benches, desperate for someone to talk with, eager to find someone who cares about them. Who needs that kind of freedom?

We have sought the ideal of mutual dependence of the old and the young. We are left, then, with no full, rich and positive vision of old age.

The result is neglect, isolation and meaningless anguish for millions of old people.

IF THE PROSPECT in the years ahead was only more of the same, that would be sad enough. But the worst is still before us.

The most obvious problem is that the proportion of aged in the population will continue to grow—from nine per cent at present to 11 per cent within another 20 years or so.

There will, in particular, be a very large increase in the number of those 75 and over, a great proportion of whom will need considerable care and attention if they are to survive.

But will they be allowed to survive? One price to be paid for survival will be an increasingly expensive investment of medical resources.

The array of medical miracles which can stave off death is increasing, and so is the cost of those miracles.

Should the elderly have access to incredibly expensive open-heart surgery, or bypass operations, or around-the-clock medical care?

Why, some are now asking, should large sums be invested in research on diseases which afflict primarily older people (cancer, heart disease) rather than on diseases which impair the lives of young people (e.g., genetic disease)?

These are pertinent and reasonable questions, which would arise even if we did not already have a problem about respecting the elderly.

PUT IN THE context, however, of a growing indifference to the elderly, they become ominous.

If the elderly are already unwanted, but still at least grudgingly tolerated, the rising cost of medical care and technology may make the next step possible. That step is, in the name of medical scarcity, to begin denying aid to the elderly.

Our culture is still not so grotesque that it would act in an openly brutal way. It always needs its moral excuses.

Medical scarcity, rising costs, the needs of youth—they may do very well as those excuses, and all the more cleverly because there is more

than a grain of truth in them. They will not have to be invented. They will be there for the taking.

NEXT WEEK: "Politics: The domestic struggle for power"

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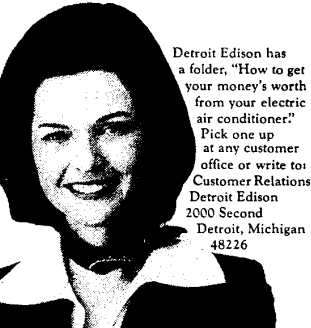
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Nancy Dickerson, prominent national correspondent, reports for Detroit Edison:

Here are some energy-saving tips to help take the heat off your air-conditioning budget this summer.



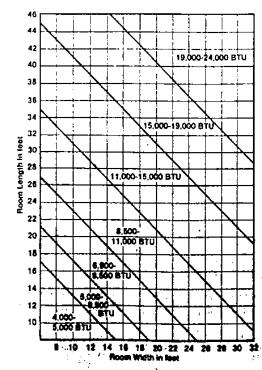
Detroit Edison has a folder, "How to get your money's worth from your electric air conditioner." Pick one up at any customer office or write to: Customer Relations, Detroit Edison, 2000 Second Detroit, Michigan 48226

The right BTU and high EER spell comfort and savings. Whichever you choose, a portable room air conditioner or central air conditioning to cool the whole house, the right size unit (BTUs) and a high Energy Efficiency Rating (EER) will give you the best return for your air-conditioning dollar.

The right size (or capacity) is important because an air conditioner that's too small will work overtime and still not return the comfort you want. If the unit is larger than you need, it will cool too quickly, cycle too frequently, and not remove enough excess moisture from the air. You'll feel uncomfortable and clammy and you'll be wasting money on energy costs.

Some air conditioners use more electricity than others to do the same job. So look for a unit with a high EER number. The higher the number, the more efficient it is.

Here's how to size up an air conditioner. To find out the size of the air conditioner you need, measure the length and width of the room you want to cool. If you're considering a central air conditioner, measure each room in the house.



Now find the zone on the chart where the lines for room length and width meet. The figure in that zone is the BTU output, an indication of the air-conditioning capacity required to cool your room. For a central air conditioner, add the BTU requirements together for all rooms.

A little simple division makes you an efficiency expert.

MODEL NUMBER ACR20B 74F		
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BTUs	WATTS	

To figure out the EER number of any air conditioner yourself, divide the BTU number by the number of watts needed by the unit. You'll find both numbers on the metal plate attached to the air conditioner.

For example, a unit that delivers 6400 BTUs with 800 watts has an EER rating of 8. (800 goes into 6400 8 times.) The recommended EER number for any air conditioner is 8 or more. You may pay a little more, but you'll save energy costs in the long run.

Keeping your air conditioner cool keeps you cool.

When you bring your portable room air conditioner home, install it on the shady side of the house. If you must place it on the sunny side, you'll keep your operating costs lower if you plant shrubs or trees near it for shade during the hottest part of the day. Carefully seal all around your unit and close cracks around windows and doors. If central air conditioning is installed in an existing furnace, it's important to seal all cracks in the air ducts.

It pays to insulate. Good home insulation will keep you more comfortable in summer and cut down on your air-conditioning costs. It will also make a big reduction in your heating bill in winter. It's one of the best

home improvements you can make and will pay for itself in a few years time. Spring and summer are good times to have the job done when contractors are less busy. Detroit Edison can help you with the financing and give you the names of professional contractors. Just call or stop in at your Detroit Edison customer office and ask about Detroit Edison's Home Insulation Finance Plan.

Tips to help you maintain your cool.

You'll conserve energy and save on operating costs if you keep your air conditioner in good working order. So before each cooling season, have a licensed service contractor check your unit over. During the summer, replace or wash filters often and keep outside coils free of debris, and keep cooling drain open for free condensate flow. Clean registers and return ducts regularly on central air-conditioning systems and avoid blocking cool air outlets. Set your thermostat no lower than about 10 degrees below the outside temperature for the most comfort and best efficiency.

Detroit Edison is a concerned participant in America's crusade for conservation. The wise use of energy plays one of the most important roles in that effort. But it requires a working partnership between those who supply energy and those who use it. Selecting energy-efficient appliances is one of the ways you can help. You'll also save on your electric bill.

Conserve for all it's worth. The power is in your hands.

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