Navigating Aging Proactively - Insights from Aging Strategist Allison O'Shea

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Guest: Allison O'Shea

Resources: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok: search for Openly Aging Website: openlyaging.com

Allison O'Shea: 0:29

In 2022, the Surgeon General put out a memo, that said social connection, loneliness, and isolation is one of the worst things since an epidemic for the aging population. And a quick fact is in 1900 there was only a hundred thousand people over the age of 85 in America. They're predicting by 2050 that there's gonna be 19 million people over the age of 85. Being isolated and lonely is one of the worst things we can do, not only for our aging, but our brain. A lot of the dementia I saw, and I'm not a doctor, so full disclosure, but many things I saw in my memory care communities that dementia from stagnation is a real thing. Not engaging with people can really affect our brain. Social connection is a very, very important piece, and it is proving to be more important than your diet and exercise.

David Lowry: 1:27

Hello everyone. That was Allison O'Shea. She is our guest today on Peaceful Life Radio, and she is a really great person who works in the aging industry. We're gonna learn so many things today. Hey, with me today is my good friend Don Drew. Don, how's it going?

Don Drew: 1:42

I'm feeling great, David, and I'm excited to introduce this week's guest, Allison O'Shea author, aging strategist, and speaker. Allison possesses over 20 years as senior living executive and working hands-on with seniors and families, including roles as executive director in various senior living communities and is a trusted voice in aging advocacy. In 2022, she founded Openly Aging LLC, launching herself as a dedicated aging strategist to help individuals and families navigate the complexities of aging proactively. And in March of last year, she published Openly Aging Four Pillars to Keep Control of Your Aging Journey, a practical 84 page guide focused on health, independence, planning, and relationships. Her mission with Openly Aging is simple, yet profound: to help people stay in control of their aging journey with intention and empowerment. Allison's book Openly Aging: Four Pillars to Keep Control of Your Aging Journey, is available on Amazon, and you can find her through her website at openlyaging.com Allison, O'Shea, thank you for joining us on Peaceful Life Radio.

Allison O'Shea: 2:46

Thank you so much. I'm very excited to be here. I appreciate it.

David Lowry: 2:49

Allison, we're so glad to have you on the podcast today. Thank you for being here. It's always interesting to know what drew you to this kind of work with seniors and their families and dedicating yourself to this industry?

Allison O'Shea: 3:01

I actually got my degree in something called therapeutic recreation. I spent four years learning how to help people recreate. And of course I got out of college thought I was gonna work with children. It was that normal thing. You have no experience, but you have this degree, had a hard time finding a role, and then I stumbled, really accidentally, into being an activity director in a memory care community. I walked into that memory care community and just fell in love. I realized, wow, it was exactly what I needed to be. I didn't need to be working with children. I needed to be working in the aging space. But through that, I realized there was a business model, senior living. And so I very quickly grew into an executive director of a small memory care. And 15 years in that industry, 18 total, 15 as a director role, and my buildings got bigger and bigger, we had independent living, assisted living, and memory care. And if you can imagine 18 years of working with aging individuals in communities, I literally saw thousands of people age, not just hundreds, not just my mother, I saw a wide variety of aging journeys, family dynamics, and crisis. I would say for most of my career I fell into that bucket where, Oh, we age, we don't do anything, and then when something happens, we move into assisted living. And it wasn't until COVID, I started taking a step back and realizing, Wow, there is so much we could be doing way ahead of time to avoid higher level of care or to keep control of our aging journey and not have to rely on others to make decisions for us. And that's when I started Openly Aging to change that idea and help people get ahead of aging instead of just waiting for aging and then making decisions.

Don Drew: 4:58

Allison in your book, the title starts Out With Openly Aging, and that's also the name of your business. What does Openly Aging mean to you?

Allison O'Shea: 5:06

To me, it means acknowledging we're aging. It's the elephant in the room. That's why my logo is an elephant. We spend so much time focused on youth and being youthful, and we're all aging. I'm older now than when we started talking a few minutes ago, and so I think it's this idea of taking the shame out of aging.

Don Drew: 5:26

Let me ask you about another term you use. You call yourself a aging strategist. What does that mean?

Allison O'Shea: 5:32

So I was trying to figure out this word and then openly, and I was like, Ah, that is it. That is my word. So Openly Aging was born. I found so many people that moved into my communities and a lot of the issues they had is because they never acknowledged that aging was happening to them. They knew that their memory was starting to not be as sharp, but they hid it out of embarrassment. They knew that their balance wasn't good, but they pretended like it was so they tried to hide it. That's the worst thing we can do as

we age. If we are struggling with aging related issues the minute we have a struggle we should be at the doctor. We should be talking to our family. We should be putting interventions in place. Openly Aging to me means, Let's do this. We can't stop it, so let's do it, but keep control of it.

Don Drew: 6:23

Let me ask you about another term you use. You call yourself a aging strategist. What does that mean?

Allison O'Shea: 6:29

In the aging industry there's a lot of different types of support and one of them is called, a geriatric care manager. They are a very needed resource in our aging world. A geriatric care manager are boots on the ground for people who are aging, helping you with doctor's appointments. They may fill pillboxs. It's a perfect role that people would hire out if you don't have a robust support system and you needed somebody to support you. When I first started Openly Aging, naturally the aging industry wanted to lump me into that category and, I realized very quickly after the first year of Openly Aging that's not what I really wanted to do. My ultimate goal is to get ahead of aging. So when I use the term strategist, I sit with independent aging individuals and we talk through their four pillars, the basis of my book. We play out, If this happens, what would you want? Or is this living environment gonna work for you as you age? So we strategize. We're not making any big decisions, we're just saying. What services could you afford in the future? What services can't you afford in the future so you can have a strategic outlook on your aging journey.

David Lowry: 7:40

Allison, I want to know more about these four pillars of aging. Can you introduce us and lightly overview them and then we'll go a little more in depth.

Allison O'Shea: 7:47

When I was in senior living, I witnessed a lot of crisis. And when I sat down I realized that every crisis I encountered fell into one of these pillars. That pillar for that person was broken. It didn't work anymore, or it was damaged. So the first pillar is support system. You have to know who your support system is as you age. Where do they live? What does it look like? Do they know? Number two is your living environment. You have to be strategic about where you're living. Does it make sense long term? It may work for now, but will it work later? Number three is your supportive services. This is the education piece of the pillars. Do you know how your money relates to services in the future? Do you know what you can and can't afford? You should know how business models work way before you need them. So when a crisis comes, it's a more organized, thoughtful, intentional decision. And number four is social connection. We can be independent and live in our home that we've lived in for 40 years till the day we pass away. But if we're doing it lonely and sitting in a chair and no one's visiting us, that's not the quality of life that I want. And so being intentional about social connection.

Don Drew: 8:57

So the first pillar is having a strong support system. What are some of the common misconceptions about who should be in that system?

Allison O'Shea: 9:03

A lot of times when I say support system, people automatically go to, Oh my gosh, you're talking about, the people that are gonna shower me, toilet me, all those like doom and gloom things. And that's not what I'm referring to. I'm referring to when that moment in time comes, if you are not feeling well and don't feel safe driving to the doctor's office, you know who could be that person that could help support you in that. Who is that person if you do have an emergency? We all have emergencies no matter what age we're at, but they do intensify as we get older. Who is those people that you call on. It's surrounding yourself with people that know that their role is to be there to support you. You're gonna do everything you can to keep yourself independent, but it's being more intentional that they know their role. You know what their role is and you've had conversations and it works for everybody and you can have open and honest conversations about your aging journey with these people. That's what I consider a support system.

David Lowry: 10:02

So let's look into this next area of our living environment and that kind of supportive situation. Tell us what we need to know about that.

Allison O'Shea: 10:10

This is one of the areas I feel like is most misunderstood. We buy this family home and it is a sense of pride to stay in this family home. I'm gonna age at home. I mean, you hear that all the time. I'm gonna age at home. I'm not going to a community. Well, does that home that you raised your children in make sense for an active, engaged, independent, 70-year-old who is trying to live their best life? And if you can't drive, does that living environment support or a hindrance to your social connection? How big is the home? Are you using a thousand square feet of a 3,500 square foot home? People always say, Oh, well I don't have a mortgage. Well, how much are you paying to upkeep this large house you're determined to stay in? People have this misconception that, Oh, we move out of our home, we go to senior living. And that is the most absurd thing. There are so many other options when it comes to living environment. It does not mean going to senior living. It just means maybe downsizing. A condo, a duplex, a patio home. Do you want social connection easily accessible to you. Are we setting ourselves up for success in our living environment, or is that gonna be the reason we're unsuccessful because of our living environment? I wanna make sure people understand I'm not telling you to run out and do anything today. I want you to be thoughtful. And if you look around in your current living situation and picture yourself at 85 years old, maybe not driving as much, does the current situation you're in support, social connection and being independent, or does it actually do the opposite? And then the last thing is if you do ever need supportive services, care in your home, does this house allow you to afford it or is it holding your money and you're not able to afford the care you may need?

Don Drew: 12:04

Allison, talk to us a little bit more about the third pillar supportive services? What all is included in that? I would imagine that's probably a pretty expansive area.

Allison O'Shea: 12:12

So why this is one of my pillars is I also found that when a crisis occurred, it was the first time people actually did any research or got educated on services that would help them through the crisis. They didn't know how much things cost. They didn't know how to use them, how to ask for the right services. And I'll give a perfect example. Most people do not know the difference between home health and home care. One is covered by insurance and one is private pay. Just that little example, if you were to dive deeper into it, is home care can be up to$50 an hour, depending on where you live, for caregivers in your home, that kind of thing, but home health is therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and it's covered by insurance. But there's no care involved. So right away somebody has a crisis and they start calling companies and they are totally confused. They have this new service, they have unmet expectations because they didn't understand the service. They thought, Oh, home health covered by insurance. They're gonna come and help give mom a shower. And home health comes in and says, No, we don't do anything like that. So when I say supportive services, getting yourself educated, every decision you make as you're being strategic with your aging, should bring up a new educational option. If your home makes sense for you, and as your strategist, I'm like, Yeah, you got a pretty good setup here, you know that there may be a time where home care may be needed. I hope it never is, but you gotta be aware that it could be because you plan on staying home. So as your strategist, we would sit down and I would educate you on, All right, let's look at home care. How do you activate home care? How is it paid for? What can you expect? What can they do, what they can't do? So you giving yourself high level educations on potential services that may enter your universe as you age. So when the time comes, you're prepared. You already know what you can afford, how the services work. That is an example of that supportive services pillar and how it can be very unique to each individual person.

David Lowry: 14:25

Allison, you talk about the importance of social connections and that's something often overlooked by seniors. We just assume our group of friends will always be there and things are going to go on like that forever, but they change, don't they? Talk to us about that.

Allison O'Shea: 14:40

Back in 2022, the Surgeon General put out a memo, that said social connection, loneliness, and isolation is one of the worst things since an epidemic for the aging population. And a quick fact is in 1900 there was only a hundred thousand people over the age of 85 in America. They're predicting by 2050 that there's gonna be 19 million people over the age of 85. So 85 plus is actually the fastest growing age group to date. The likelihood of people living to be 85 is the highest it's ever been. But 60% of people over the age of 85 do need some sort of support. And a lot of times that support can be helped or managed with a great social connection. And that's how you stay independent. Being isolated and lonely is one of the worst things we can do, not only for our aging, but our brain. A lot of the dementia I saw, and I'm not a doctor, so full

disclosure, but many things I saw in my memory care communities that dementia from stagnation is a real thing. Not engaging with people can really affect our brain. Social connection is a very, very important piece, and it is proving to be more important than your diet and exercise. Even introverts, need connection. And people always say, well, I'm an introvert. So what happens is we age, we doing great. We're probably really involved in our church. Maybe we have family local, so we're really involved. But all of a sudden, if you look around our world gets smaller and maybe we're not comfortable getting out as much, or we're starting to have health issues, we have completely isolated ourselves, and that is not great. That's not conducive to staying independent. I got my degree in therapeutic recreation, so I know how to help people recreate. And there's two types of recreators. We have purposeful recreators. They love a volunteer. They like to go, know what the job is, but it's social, but know what their role is. These are the ones in charge of the meal trains and they're always vice president of every women's club, men's club. But there's others that are social creators and they love to hang out. They love a party. They love bingo. And if you are a social recreator, Senior Centers are great. Knowing where you fall in how you recreate helps you be strategic with your recreation as you age. So part of how all these pillars connect to each other is realizing the living environment and making sure the social connection is a big piece of that decision. How are we getting our social connection? So there's many different ways, but being mindful and being aware that, Okay, if I continue to age in my current situation, does this support or hinder my social connection?

Don Drew: 17:25

You know Allison on Peaceful Life Radio we have had a lot of guests talk about individual pieces of things that you've been discussing. So let me ask you this. In terms of aging, when should we start getting serious about planning or having a strategy as we age? When should we start thinking about that?

Allison O'Shea: 17:42

When I started Openly Aging, that was a struggle for me because I was only being called by adult children because they were like in a crisis with mom. And I really wanted to speak to the aging person. That was my ultimate goal. But when you're healthy and independent, you don't think you need a coach or a consultant. But I truly feel the most successful Super Ages are really thinking about this upon retirement. So you retire, maybe give it a few years. I always say the sweet spot is between 70 and 80 healthy. If you start having health issues, that's when you definitely need to talk to a strategist. If you're starting to have concerns about any kind of aging issue, that should right away you should be calling. But if you're healthy and active and doing well, 75 is always kind of a good middle ground. You've been retired for a few years. Your kids are probably settled where they're gonna be for a while. You got grandkids, you wanna stay independent. My ideal person that would read my book and really be strategic about their aging journey is post-retirement. When you're healthy and independent, and you have to have a mindset of not only growth, but a mindset of, I'm doing this and I wanna do it right, and I wanna be thoughtful and strategic about it.

David Lowry: 18:56

Allison, can you share a story or two that's profoundly impacted your understanding about the aging process?

Allison O'Shea: 19:02

Yes. So my grandmother, Helen Miller, she was a spitfire seven kids. Went back to school after her kids went to college, became a teacher. She was a principal. All of her children were everywhere. I was here in North Carolina and she moved here and it was a big to do with all of her children. Well, my grandmother moved into an apartment. And at that time I was knee deep in the Kool-Aid of senior living, and I would say, come on, grandma, like you're in this apartment. She was 89 88 working at Kohl's across the street and it was a transient apartment. You know, people moved in and out. I live in the triangle in North Carolina, one of the biggest places, and she, No, I am so happy. I love my apartment. She worked at Kohl's. They would put her on the nighttime and she would never complain and she lived successfully and happily in that apartment until she was 91. She unfortunately got cancer. She decided not to treat it. It was pretty aggressive. And three months, she passed away. But in that apartment, I was trying to get her to go to independent living. But she was a very purposeful recreator. Number one, she needed to work. She loved that. She looked at senior living. She didn't wanna be around all the old people. But it really was a pivotal moment for me because she did it her way, but she did it in such a powerful, impactful, healthy way. And we would talk about aging issues. She didn't hide away from aging issues. She didn't pretend she wasn't aging, but she took care of herself. She cared about being healthy. And then from the other side, I have somebody else in my life who the biggest extrovert you would ever know in your life. Never met a stranger. Would just talk to anyone. When I first met this person, it was almost embarrassing. You'd go somewhere and they were just talking to everyone. Well, unfortunately, their spouse never wanted, still doesn't want to leave the family home. They've been in there, raised their boys there. Well, this person now sits on a couch, watching the news all day, and the only social engagement they receive is when other people come to them. And I have watched this person deteriorate mentally. Now diagnosed with mild dementia. And I know it's absolutely from lack of using a very big piece of who they are. They're healthy physically, they're fine. They're happy. Everything's fine. But I am just witnessing that, saying, Wow, you know, this person would've really thrived in more of a social environment when they were 75. Easily would live to a hundred, healthy and independent and totally happy. There's no right or wrong answer on how we age, but I know how I wanna age and I wanna live to a hundred. And I think there's many people out there who also wanna do it in the right way. And there's a big difference between lifespan and health span. I could live to a hundred, but if I am sitting on a couch watching the news and my brain is rotting, or could I be out engaging with people and just have my calendar full and walking and living life? That's the way I wanna age. So, those would be two examples of how I've seen it in my own life. And then forget the thousands of examples I have from all the other people I've seen.

Don Drew: 22:12

You've chosen this career of Openly Aging and it sounds fascinating to me. What do you think is one of the most rewarding aspects of your work as an aging strategist

Allison O'Shea: 22:21

Changing people's idea on aging. Like we've generationally just Okay, people age and they just age. There was never like a forethought. The adult children would be like, oh yeah, she's been struggling for a long time. We just didn't know how to say anything to her. They're sneaking around talking about mom behind her back. And I'm like, Oh my gosh. How undignified! So when I think about an aging strategist, I think it's bringing a new way to think about aging to people as they're entering into a new chapter in life and saying, Hey, we don't have to accept the norms we've always accepted. And that's why I love what I do, and feel it's so important. I feel like it's kind of a game changer in the culture of changing. I wanna be a change agent in how we talk about it.

David Lowry: 23:11

Allison, this has been a great program. I think everybody needs this book on Openly Aging. It's a resource everybody needs. I'm for sure going to study it because I'm close to retirement age. I'm not at the magic age you talked about just yet, but, let's just say I'm standing on the hill running down towards that age. What's next for you?

Allison O'Shea: 23:31

Thank you for asking that. It's been an interesting journey with Openly Aging. I do newsletters. I'm on TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook. Everything is under Openly Aging. The more people that I can give tidbits to and educate through social media is really fulfilling to me. And I think it's the first step in changing how we look at aging. So I would love the first set of actions for anyone interested in learning more is to follow me. And then of course, I am a consultant. I am a strategist. I do have private clients. And if you're interested in that, go to my website, you can see my services. I do a four session package that is really helpful to get somebody on their way at the beginning of their aging journey to understand what they're looking at. So follow me and just keep looking out for Openly Aging because I think there's more, bigger and better things coming.

Don Drew: 24:24

Thanks to Allison O'Shea and her work, it's possible to see how you can reframe aging from something that happens to you. To seeing aging as a journey you can proactively manage. Her mission with openly Aging is simple, yet profound: to help people stay in control of their aging journey with intention and empowerment. Allison's book Openly Aging Four Pillars to Keep Control of Your Aging Journey, is available on Amazon, and you can find her through her website at openlyaging.com. Allison, O'Shea thank you for joining us on Peaceful Life Radio.