



Why Seniors Matter—And How They Contribute to Our Everyday Lives

by Verena Menec, 2012

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- 1 Stories **abound** in the media about how seniors are going to bankrupt the health care system or how the Canadian pension system will collapse under the burden of a growing senior population.
- 2 What we don't hear in the midst of all of these **doomsday stories**—which are not based in evidence, and are simply wrong—is how seniors contribute to society.
- 3 The fact that people live longer than ever should be celebrated as one of the biggest success stories in history. As the saying goes: “Getting old is better than the **alternative**.”
- 4 How do seniors contribute to society? Like any younger person, they shop, they use services (which employ people), and they pay taxes. They also volunteer; in fact, many organizations would be hard pressed to function without their older volunteers.
- 5 Seniors also give generously: they make more **charitable** donations **per capita** than any other age group.
- 6 Seniors babysit; they look after grandchildren. One can only imagine what would happen to our economy if, suddenly, no grandparents were available to look after grandchildren. How many parents would have to scramble to find other care options (already scarce)—or would have to miss work because they couldn't find alternatives? How many soccer games or ballet classes would be missed if grandma or grandpa were not there to drive the grandchildren?

- 7 Seniors do housework, home maintenance and yard work—not just for themselves, but for others as well. They provide transportation or run errands for others. They provide emotional support and friendship, like the senior who looks in on a [house-bound](#) friend to make sure that everything is alright and stays for a chat.
- 8 Seniors provide care for spouses or friends. Think of the wife who takes on more and more responsibilities in and outside the home as her husband starts to get frail. She may not think of herself as a caregiver, but without her, what would happen to him? Who would get the groceries, run errands, do the cooking, take him to medical appointments?
- 9 Other family members are not always available to help. They may live too far away or have health problems themselves. There are organizations that can help out—but the bulk of these supports are made possible because of volunteers.
- 10 And the volunteers are typically seniors.
- 11 Then there is the husband who takes care of his wife who has Alzheimer's, who, from moment to moment, can no longer remember what day of the week it is, never mind what month or year, whether she has eaten, or what she just did; who keeps asking the same question over and over again, forgetting the answer as soon as it is given. He makes sure she gets dressed, eats properly, takes her medication, accompanies her to the doctor, and keeps her life as normal as possible. Without him, she would not be able to live at home anymore, but would have to be admitted to a care home.
- 12 Because of him, she is able to stay in familiar surroundings for as long as possible. Because of him, she is not a “burden” on the health care system.
- 13 Rather than creating [catastrophic](#) visions of the impact of the “gray [tsunami](#),” it would help if we took a more balanced approach to the aging population. We need policy solutions to address the real challenges, such as: How do we ensure that family and friends who care for older adults and play such an important role in their lives receive the supports they need? How do we provide supports in communities to make them as age-friendly as possible so that seniors can continue to contribute to society and have the best quality of life?
- 14 Acknowledging seniors' contributions would help to make ours a more [age-inclusive](#) society that does not pit one generation against the other. It would also be a more accurate reflection of how most of us engage with each other in our every day lives.

