

Mindy Fried:

Well, I think that first of all, we live in a culture where people don't like to talk about death and dying or decline. I think that we need to really challenge that kind of presumption, or that kind of fear that we have about speaking openly with people that we love about what is a natural part of life, which is decline and aging and eventually leaving this universe. I mean, there's different cultural approaches that people have to that experience, but generally, we live in an ageist culture in which youth, especially through the commercial world, is kind of glorified. We don't want to acknowledge that we have wrinkles, or that we forget somebody's name, or whatever, some of those things that are of normal parts of aging. I think that back to your question, what's really important is that we try and break some of those unspoken rules and start having conversations within families about the experience of aging and decline and just be honest about it.

I with my own daughter at one point, she's in her early 30s, and my spouse is an amazing cook, and I'm not, so I was just using the example of my crappy cooking as a way into talking about what I might do if I were to survive beyond the time when my husband does, so I just was joking around about how I better look at all those recipe books and figure out how to do this, and she laughed about it, but underlying that is a reality that somebody's going to go first, and hopefully not for another 20, 25, 30 years, who knows, but I think it is important to talk about those things, and to think also, I do think that the advice that I have been given by experts is to start thinking about the kinds of support that you want.

Most people want to stay in their own homes, or as in a case, what you have in a multi-generational home where you're able to care for your mother-in-law. Nobody says, "Gosh, I hope when I get older I can live in a nursing home." There are some major problems with institutional care, so I'll just stop right there, but I'd say talk about it. Talk about it, normalize the conversation, and that's the way to go.

Chris Velardi:

Well, and I think as you mentioned, talking about something that maybe isn't quite as heavy as some of the things you can talk about like cooking is a good door-opener, it's a good start to the conversation because yeah, it's real, but it's not quite those heavy topics that you know might be able to talk about one thing, and then you're done. You can start there and then it may shift in other directions and move. I think there's just so many layers to it that it's not one conversation, it's going to be multiple ongoing conversations about all those layers.

Mindy Fried:

Exactly.

Chris Velardi:

One of the parts of it that is a reality from any families when they are in a situation like this is, okay, what does that mean for my job? How do I balance those things? How do I find a way to not let my work down and not let my family down, whether that's the older parent I'm caring for, maybe the younger children I'm also trying to care for? I know you've spent some time looking into

that world of family care. Have we gotten better in this country about it? Where do you see us in terms of allowing for those types of situations?

Mindy Fried:

Have we gotten better? Ironically, because of the pandemic, so many people are working remotely and that's become more acceptable, more norm. I did a study in 2000 was released in which I looked at five Fortune 500 companies and their approach to flexible work policies. The companies wanted to know, "Is this going to be okay for the bottom line, and our workers happier?" Those two things are connected. At the time when we released the findings from the study, it seemed pretty revolutionary, and there was so much resistance. People would just talk about, workers would talk about how they're being able to work at home on a couple days a week or work flexibly was really resented by their coworkers.. If they got a promotion, it was really resented. Some of that has shifted, okay? Has the workplace changed dramatically to accommodate people's needs? It kind of depends on what kind of work people are doing. There's some kind of work that people can't work flexibly, and people who are in those kinds of jobs really still struggle and suffer with that balance.

We still don't have a paid family leave policy in the US. We're one of the very few western industrial countries without that kind of policy. I mean, earlier in my career, I studied parental leave, and wrote about that. Now, I'm looking at leave for elder care, and it's the same story. Things are really not where they need to be, so we need a paid leave policy that's longer than a 12-week unpaid leave policy we have now. It can't be company by company, that's not acceptable. We need to have flexible work policies, everything from telecommuting, which people are doing more of now, but also flexible work hours, and shared work.

Then people also, I mean, we don't often think about this when we're talking about those kinds of family policies, but there's an enormous wage gap in this country where women earn less than men still and people of color earn less than in comparison to white people or white men, so that also needs to be equalized, looked at. The other thing I'll just add is that there is a caregiving penalty in this country from a wage perspective, and if you are earning less in your younger years, that will then play out in terms of the kind of social security income you get when you're older, so being poor when you're young can lead to being poor when you're older. There's so many policies we need to look at and those are just a few.

Chris Velardi:

So many layers. You talk about the flexible work policies and remote work and those things. I think some companies are seeing that those are things that employees or potential employees are absolutely considering when it comes to, "Do I take this job or that job? Is this the opportunity for me or is that the opportunity?" But across the board, there's not a lot of consistency. There's a lot of Wild West.

Mindy Fried: That's right. That's right. I think that you're pointing out something really important. I did ethnographic study of a financial services company, which had a fantastic childcare center. I called it a kiddie condo. People would choose to work there because they had a great childcare center. People would not want to leave their jobs because of that childcare center. But that center was not the whole picture. You had to look at workplace policies and culture because it wasn't necessarily true that people loved working there, but they were stuck there.

Chris Velardi: The one benefit outweighed everything else.

Mindy Fried: Exactly.

Chris Velardi:

aging, AAAs, not the kind for cars, but the kind for care. They exist all over the country, so if you're in any part of the country, you can look up your area agency on aging, go to them, and they hopefully will help you navigate the system. But most people don't even know that that exists.

Chris Velardi: They don't know where the resource is to help them find the resources they need to make it all happen, yeah.

Mindy Fried: Exactly, exactly. I mean, there is one of the things in my current season, I feature an incredibly innovative program out in Washington State called WA Cares. WA Cares is the first publicly-run social insurance long-term care program, so basically if you have put money into the system, just like Social Security or Medicare, if you put money into the system through your job, you're then eligible to get money towards any kind of home long-term care supports and services that you need. They're just starting it now, and so in a few years, people will start to be able to reap those benefits, but they can get up to \$36,000-plus over a lifetime, rather. Its an incredible program, and there's other states that are considering doing that outside of the Medicaid system, so you don't have to be really poor to access it.

Chris Velardi:

Chris Velardi: Yeah. I know you've taught and lectured at colleges. Do you find yourself drawing from some of those professors who stood out to you?

Mindy Fried: Yeah, I think especially when I ended up selecting a major, I was a psych social work major, and I think that some of the small group stuff that I experienced, the kinds of conversations that we had were really meaningful. I ended up, when I was in the MSW program, I ended up doing an independent study with a Gestalt psychologist named Sam Graceffo, who's probably still out there in the world somewhere. He was a really wonderful mentor to me, and that I hold onto, that just one-on-one mentoring that I got from him.

I worked closely with this guy, Jonathan Friedman, also a professor at the time

