

Age And Stage Episode 13

Daisy McAndrew 00:06

Hello and a very warm welcome to Age & Stage. This is the podcast for everyone caring for or supporting elderly relatives, parents, friends or neighbours.

Peter Thornton 00:16

I use the phrase older persons because I think people should be seen as individuals, not as a group. No, it's not 'they'. It's this individual person. Maybe she doesn't, or maybe she does. You know, it's not the whole group.

Annabel James 00:32

My name's Daisy McAndrew. I'm Annabel James, and this is Age & Stage.

Daisy McAndrew 00:38

Well, Annabel, I'm really looking forward to chatting to Peter Thornton today. I've got his book in my hand 'The Later Years - The Simple Guide To Organising the Rest Of Your Life', which sounds like rather a big undertaking, organising the rest of your life. But what's great about this book is it is really practical. And he's got sort of bite sized chunks in these different chapters about things we all should be thinking about and how to be organised, and he's almost got checklists of what to do. And I'm really, really looking forward to hearing from him and why he thought it was important to write this book.

Annabel James 01:16

I agree. I think, when I had a look at it, I think, as you say, there's so much information in there. I'm fascinated to know how he actually even started to think about how to almost put it together, because there's a lot of information distilled down into, as you say, really bite sized chunks. So completely fascinating. And I love the sort of thread that runs through it, which is about positivity and enjoying older age. And if you do some of this stuff, this will make things so much better. So I totally agree. I'm really looking forward to it. Peter was a Human Rights barrister, an Old Bailey judge, and the first Chief Coroner of England and Wales, so we're particularly lucky to have him here today. So welcome Peter. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Peter Thornton 01:57

Thank you very much for inviting me, Annabel.

Annabel James 01:59

It would be lovely, just to start off, if we may, about you and your life and how you arrived at writing a book.

Peter Thornton 02:05

Well I suppose really, I had older parents, so I have been through that process of what they had to do and how things were done, and they were in their late 80s and 90s. My in-laws also both made it to 98

so I've seen a lot of the processes of, we try not to use the word decline, but there is, you know, that gradual decline and how to deal with it and what has to be done. And also, I had a few friends who said, Well, you know, I've had a relative who've just died. What have I got to do? I know there are things I have to do, I can find a bit here online. And so I would give them a sheet, a single sheet of paper, which had 10 things on it to do, five to do in five days, and the others, so they didn't have to worry too much, as long as they ticked off the list as they went down. And then I thought, well, there's a few other things we can think about before death which need to have a few ticked off here and there. So that's where I started.

Daisy McAndrew 03:10

Peter, it's such a clever book because it's so practical in exactly the way that you've just described, of giving somebody a list to tick off, and particularly either when somebody is, as you described, in decline or struggling, and then that period after somebody dies, when people are so no matter how expected it is, people are full of grief and comforting other members of the family, and thinking about practical things is really very difficult, isn't it?

Peter Thornton 03:39

Yes, my last chapter is really about after death. You know what has to be done, how to do it on a practical basis. But the whole book is really a simple, practical manual. And I do try and be, despite the inevitable decline that we may have to think about sometimes, I do try and be positive and reassuring. That's part of the idea. You know, we should be as positive about our later years or the later years of our parents and close family. It's important, and there's plenty of things to be positive about. As Shirley Bassey said, you don't get older, you get better. So let's enjoy!

Annabel James 04:18

Well, it's a perfect philosophy, and I think it's something that we try to do a little bit on this podcast. I think one of the things, certainly your book, is absolutely centre to this, is planning ahead. And actually, you know, you can have a much better older life with a little bit of forethought. I think it fascinates both of us at our age, in our 50s, and also having elderly parents, obviously, that we're still not very good at planning. For some reason, we're all massively in denial. I mean, who's got the answer to that?

Peter Thornton 04:49

Well I'm very keen about thinking about what could be done, but I'm also keen not to tell people what to do. Different people have different ways of thinking about these things. The only thing I would say is a must is draft a will, because otherwise your wishes may not be recognised when the wishes of the state instead come up. So that's the only thing I suggest people really should do. And we're not terribly good as a nation writing our wills.

Daisy McAndrew 05:22

I find it extraordinary. The number, the percentage of people that don't draft a will. I understand, if somebody is in their 20s or 30s, I mean, even then, we know everybody should do it, but the staggering number of older people that don't do it. And I wonder perhaps whether, as relatives, we find that it's a bit embarrassing to ask somebody, have you drawn, you know, a will? Because it maybe seems a bit nosy and sort of impertinent.

Peter Thornton 05:47

It does seem a little bit nosy in some ways, but I think it's really important to have this sort of discussion, particularly if you're thinking about drafting one, maybe a discussion with your children, what are you intending to put in your will? They might say, Oh, well, yeah, don't be ridiculous, dad. That doesn't make any sense at all. At least they should have that discussion. It would be your decision, as the will maker to decide in the end. But why not have that discussion? You can talk a bit about, you know, what you've got and what you're going to give away. Talk about it. We're not very good at that, but we should sit down a little bit more with our children and say, Look, this may be a bit difficult for you, but actually it's not really that difficult for me. So perhaps we can have a friendly conversation about this, a cheerful conversation about, you know, what I have and what I'd like to give away when I die.

Annabel James 06:39

That makes perfect sense. I think trying to start it as a cheerful conversation is a good start point, because maybe it gets the younger generation, the adult children, a bit away from this sort of feeling of impertinence and nosiness and, you know, almost ambulance chasing, I think, which was certainly how I felt before I had that first conversation.

Daisy McAndrew 06:57

Peter, one of the things Annabel and I were discussing before meeting you today was the fact that a lot of our episodes of this podcast have been about the people in our situation who have elderly parents or relatives and how to look after them, how to cope all those things. And we were thinking how actually, perhaps we haven't really heard from the older generation. Now I know you wrote this book primarily as somebody who had much older parents, but without wishing to be rude, you are a little bit older than us, and we just wondered whether there was something from your perspective about how the next generation down deals with these issues, and how we might get things wrong? And do you revisit it quite often?

Peter Thornton 07:40

That's difficult, because everybody's different, and there may be older people who say, leave me alone. Don't interfere. It's my decision. It's my choice. I'll do what I want. We've all had a bit of that knocking around, but I think, for example, I've set out early on in the first chapter about before death, what to do. A number of practical steps which both generations can think about and maybe discuss, or at least say to your parents, Here's a possible list. It's up to you. Those are your options, but we do have to think about when something might go wrong in later years. It's the same for you or for anybody else. These things can happen. You might have a stroke, you might have a heart attack, you might go down the road of dementia. All of these things do happen. I mean, there are nearly 1 million dementia sufferers in the United Kingdom, and we're talking about, you know, 13 million older people in the United Kingdom over 65 so it's a lot of people, and it's a lot of discussions, but on a sort of one to one and close family basis, particularly, I think if you just go down the list and suggest, why not have a file? I call it an 'on-death' file, or death file. I have a file over there on my shelves in pink so it stands out. My children know where it is. They can look at it. And I've put in there my medical details, my NHS details, my birth certificate, my marriage certificate, my GP contact details, professional details, family, other members of the family. And then, very important, from a practical point of view, a financial summary list of bank

accounts, National Insurance, tax references, insurance policies. And at the same time, there is a positive side here, both for the family, they will readily be able to deal with the banks, for example, all that sort of practical stuff, which is a real grind. But also for me, it gives me some reassurance that for me, have I got my affairs reasonably in order? I've just been through the bank accounts, and I found that building society account, which has had 250 pounds in it for 25 years. Should I do something about it? Should I spend it? Should I give it to somebody? So it's a two way process. It helps the later generation, the younger generation, and it helps those in their later years. Bit of reassurance about your life being organised. Also an option to write a little memoir, a little bit about yourself, bit of history about your parents. I asked my parents when they were alive, to write a bit down about their life, and I got a page and a half from each of them. And I should really have asked them a lot more questions, so I put a bit more in mine. They may not be interested now. They might be interested later, but it's something, it's passing on the history down the generations. Yeah, obviously, not as often as I should. That's the way life is, but it should be updated. And if something changes, then it needs to be changed in the file.

Annabel James 11:09

I love that idea of a death file. I think it should be almost be mandatory really shouldn't it because it makes life so much easier than all that scrabbling around that so many of us end up doing, really.

Peter Thornton 11:19

And can I just say it doesn't have to be pink!

Annabel James 11:24

You're listening to Age & Stage from Age Space. If you'd like to find out more about how we can help, Age Space is a one stop online resource for anyone caring for or supporting elderly parents and relatives. It's packed with information on funding, on care, on legal matters, then do just please head straight to agespace.org, Now back to the conversation. Just going back to your book. I mean, there's so much information in there, and there are so much good advice, how did you decide what goes in and even what stays out of it?

Peter Thornton 11:59

Well, it's good question, but I did, for example, a chapter on health. I'm not a health expert, I'm not a dietician, I'm not a gym person myself. But I thought, from my approach, well, there will be others who will be thinking about, you know, what should I do in terms of health? And there is physical health, mental health and social health. I've just been reading a book about ageing by an immunologist, and he emphasises the third of those sort of social health more than the other two in a way. I would say that they're all equal, really, I mean, you should take some physical health, some physical exercise, the experts say, and everything I've done is based upon what I have read from a wide range of research, but from expert writers about these subjects, and the experts say, even a little exercise is worth something in terms of physical comfort. I'm not trying to extend ageing, but we want to have a comfortable life as best we can while we have it. And so those parts of ageing, I think, are based on pretty wide research and good expert advice, which I think is in a short, reasonably short, simple form, may be helpful just for you to consider more options. It's you who decides. It's your voice, your decision making. You must do it your way, and that's very important. We're all different.

Daisy McAndrew 13:37

Peter, I think your point about social life and social activities being really crucial for your mental and physical health is absolutely right. And of course, I know you have thoughts on how to continue to live independently at home for as long as possible, which a lot of people get very upset about the idea of not being able to do.

Peter Thornton 13:57

Yes there are lots of steps that can be taken, practical steps like you can adapt your house, your flat, with physical modifications, handrails from walking aids, stair lift, if you can afford it, and local authorities will help out with this sort of things, perhaps not with stair lifts but with other simpler aids, I think you can declutter, make things a little clearer and simpler, brighten up, bit of a coat of paint, I think that's quite a positive thing. If you've got loads of books, there are charities which will come and take them from you. Downsizing may be a good step. You could go to one level if you've got stairs, and in a house, you could go down to a bungalow or a flat. You will probably find in very older years that you won't be wanting to walk so far to make a cup of tea. It may also release a bit of cash for you so that you've got more spending money, so generally more manageable. I think you've also talked about sharing your home. If you've got a spare room, there are matching agencies which will help you do that so you can take in a student. They will pay a little less rent because they will help out on one or two agreed topics. They might help you with your computer, they might help with shopping or something of that kind. There are matching agencies, like Leeds Homeshare, City Council have one in London, there's Helpful Housemates, which can be used. If you're thinking about that, if that works for you, you might like to have a little company now and then with a younger person. Obviously, loneliness is something to be avoided. That's bad for mental health, social health.

Daisy McAndrew 15:50

It reminds me of the advice that a very close friend of my parents used to give them - she was quite significantly older than they were. She said that every single year, without fail, she would cultivate a younger friend, because she was very aware, as she got older, her friends would start dying, and her social life would dwindle, and she died in her 90s and had friends in their 30s because she had been so determined to surround herself with younger people.

Annabel James 16:17

And I think the home share sort of initiative does seem to be gaining some traction, doesn't it, which is brilliant, because it's so expensive to rent somewhere as a young person, so it helps them. And I think with the way the care sector is going, there's increasing amounts of what they're calling pre care or companion care, which is hugely expensive. So actually, to have somebody living in the house, I think also as an adult child, perhaps, who doesn't live terribly close to a parent, knowing that somebody is actually in the home all of the time, not caring but there, it's certainly something we should all be championing a bit more. I think.

Peter Thornton 16:57

Yes and it's an added protection, if something happens to you. You know, you have a fall and you can't manage, you haven't got a sufficient warning alarm system, having an extra person obviously in the house is a great idea.

Annabel James 17:10

Perhaps going on to that sort of subject of the tech that's available and keeping safe and well at home, I know that you have quite a few thoughts on those sort of things, really. It would be lovely to hear a bit more from your perspective.

Peter Thornton 17:25

Well, I think, from a very basic point of view, you make sure that your fire alarms, smoke alarms, CO2 alarms, are all working properly. In some places, the fire brigade will come for free and check you out. If you've got a fire, got an open fire, or wood fire burning, or in some cases, cookers and ovens which have not been updated or looked after sufficiently, can emit carbon monoxide, which is a poison, and it's got no smell, and once that escape comes, then it can kill people quite quickly. Also have, you know, if you're getting to that point, a warning system, you know, one of the little red buttons around your neck or on your wrist, one of those systems, they work quite well. And there are systems like Telecare, which will monitor your movement, where you live, and if there's any sudden, unusual movement. Telehealth will also check your blood pressure, weight, heart. Have good locks on your house for your own security. You might worry about that a little bit more when you're older.

Annabel James 18:42

And just on a purely practical note, with those sort of video doorbells for somebody not that mobile anymore, rather than having to rush to the front door. I mean, super helpful.

Peter Thornton 18:52

Yes and if you're you know, not expecting some somebody, I'm afraid you do have to beware of cold callers. So the video doorbell is quite a nice thing if you're a little bit worried about that. So sometimes one has to say to an older person, try not to err on the side of generosity sometimes. I know you would like to help. That's your very nature, and that comes up to the top first. But just be careful.

Annabel James 19:23

I mean the personal alarm things and the market of monitoring, and you can now have these things that, as you say, monitor your movement in the home, which I think some of it's about the language is quite difficult, I think, to sort of as a cell, nobody wants to be monitored or tracked. So somehow we need to change the language a bit, I think. But they are so helpful, and also, as I understand it, with all this AI stuff coming in, that they're also now able to predict behaviour and movement. So if Mum doesn't make a cup of tea in the morning, that sort of sets alarms, really not alarms, literally, but sends notifications out, and that has to be a good thing. I think for everybody,

Peter Thornton 20:05

It's good stuff. It may be difficult to set up. Sometimes it's not as simple as it might be, but we all struggle with this. You know, I feel that I'm reasonably, you know, tech savvy, but there are things which I just absolutely grapple with so I asked my son, and I find him grappling with it! So, you know, it's difficult, but if these things can be simple and work well, they can be really good, helpful aids. And you know also, you can get smart speaker reminders to take your pills. I mean, there are all sorts of

systems which work on that, though, and which are helpful, tech stuff which is helpful, which is tailored to you.

Annabel James 20:53

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Daisy McAndrew 21:12

Peter with your legal hat on, we've touched on wills already, but what are the sort of legal paperwork that people should be aware of and maybe put off because they think it's going to be complicated?

Peter Thornton 21:24

Everything is more complicated than it should be. That's how I feel about any form. Doing a will, you can do your own will. There are plenty of specimens online that you can follow if you want to. But also lasting powers of attorney are really good because they help the younger generation when something goes wrong, when something goes really badly wrong, in terms of health and assistance is required. So dealing with LPA's. Dealing both with health and care and also with money and property and as you, as an older person, my sort of age, we should think about an advanced decision to refuse medical treatment in a life threatening situation, or we should think about an advanced statement, setting out your wishes. A friend who'd read my book recently, I'd known her for a long time, she gave a really good tip, something she had done for her partner. On two sides of one piece of paper, she gave to the care home useful things to know. She described him, what sort of person he was. And then another box, which says he likes his dislikes. What made him angry, that he usually can do the following, but he often can't manage the following tasks. And on the other side of the page, a typical day, and they were really grateful in the care home.

Daisy McAndrew 23:03

And we were talking there a little bit touching on medical matters, what are the things that we should be thinking about, as far as our wishes on a do not resuscitate or similar areas?

Peter Thornton 23:15

Well, you can think about what you would like to happen or would not like to happen. You can set that out in writing, in an advanced decision, which is legally binding if it's in proper form and signed and witnessed. You can express what you would like to happen or not happen in the case of emergency. So typical example is heart attack, life saving, possible life saving treatment, CPR, but you may be frail and elderly, good chance of ribs being broken, so you can refuse to have that treatment in a life or death situation. You don't have to make that choice. You can leave everything to the medics, who will do everything in your best interest as they see it, so you don't have to do anything, but you can at least think about that. I've done a sort of draft in my book so you can look at the options. You may be in a position to actually say at the time, you know, I don't want this, but it's important that your voice is heard. And even if you don't do something which is completely legal, you might like to put even in the death file, these are my wishes in later years, if and when I'm in dire circumstances. You speak a lot about, you know, making sure that your voice is heard and knowing your rights, which I think is a really

interesting aspect to all of this. It's, you know, lots of us don't really know where our rights begin and end if you like. So it'd be really lovely to hear a bit more from your perspective, how you think about older people's rights? Well, we have no Charter of Rights for older persons. I use the phrase older persons because I think people should be seen as individuals, not as a group. Sometimes you hear in care homes, oh, they always want to do this, or blah, blah, blah. And, no, it's not they. It's this individual person. Maybe they don't, maybe she doesn't, or maybe she does. You know, it's not the whole group. So older persons, I've drafted a charter for older persons, because I think we need a sort of benchmark guideline for older people, sort of minimum standards for the 21st Century, a frame of reference so for education and training for all those who are in the health sector, care homes, banks, supermarkets. There's a whole range of services that are provided or can be accessed by older persons, where people should be thinking about dignity and respect for that individual person, but thinking about their independence, thinking about their wishes, their having a voice as an individual person, so basic good practice based on dignity and self respect. There is, for example, no Commissioner for older persons in England. There is in Wales. There is in Northern Ireland. There nearly was in Scotland, but not quite, but there isn't in England. You know, we're trying not to look too negatively about all of these things. I think it's important to remember to be positive throughout all of this, and to remember that the last census found that the 65 and older age group was the happiest, least anxious age group of all age groups. So that's almost something to look forward to. There are good things about older persons. There's much to be enjoyed. So I'm, you know, I want, in my book, people to be a little bit more organised for their own self reassurance, to be independent longer, to stay at home longer, to enjoy life longer as well. One of the things that comes out of wealth managers, money people who advise people on money is that quite a lot of people actually have more money than they need and don't spend it. Now, I'm not suggesting that people go out and spend all their money, but sometimes one should think, Well, I actually have been saving all my life. I can spend a little bit now. Let's do something good.

Annabel James 28:01

Well, thank you, Peter. It has been absolutely fascinating and incredibly helpful, and I think we both know that treats are going to go up the agenda quite fast today. But thank you very much, and good luck with the book.

Peter Thornton 28:16

Thank you. It's selling well. It's quite popular, and people write to me, saying thank you.

Annabel James 28:25

Well, Daisy, I think we got more than we bargained for from that lovely conversation with Peter. Not only did we get a quick skip through a number of chapters on important subjects, but just really interesting perspectives and views on older age and later life.

Daisy McAndrew 28:41

And I love the fact that the book came out of a sort of similar birth as to how our podcast came out, in that our podcast came out of endless chats with friends on WhatsApp offering advice and help of people, mainly women, going through very similar issues of looking after relatives and how to help. And his book came out of a similar thing where his friend's parents were dying and they were turning to him for advice on what were the practical things they needed to do, as far as probate or wills. And he

started printing off. I love the fact he said he started printing off this sort of 10 point plan to his friends, just, you know, follow this list and you'll be okay. And then he thought, well, I could do more than that. There's more advice I could give. It was lovely.

Annabel James 29:27

Oh I completely agree, Daisy, super helpful conversation. Bite sized chunks, top tips, practical, you know, everything you could hope for, really, and more. So, yeah, a huge thanks to Peter Thornton and great about his book - The Later Years which you can buy from all good bookshops. Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Age & Stage.

Daisy McAndrew 29:51

If you found this show useful, and we do hope you have, we bring you a new episode every week with the latest advice and knowledge from experts in all aspects of later life. So click follow or subscribe in your podcast app to make sure you don't miss any editions.

Annabel James 30:06

And next week, we will be chatting with Margaret Doyle and Tracy Adamson, who are elderly mediators. Quite a new thing here in the UK, but really important subject - mediation, dealing with conflict, dealing with issues and concerns amongst families, with care providers, and how best to navigate them. So we're really looking forward to that conversation.

Daisy McAndrew 30:30

I think that will be really, really useful, and we know we're laughing at ourselves because we're a bit obsessed with that sibling rivalry and simmering resentment, and "you do more than I do", and all of that. But also, I think we're going to talk to them about to them about estrangement within families, because we tend to think that it's just, you know, families do stick together, but they might not be getting on brilliantly. But of course, there are families where they've lost touch with certain members of the family, you know, perhaps the older person, or perhaps one of the siblings, and how does that impact on later life? So I think that'll be really interesting too.

Annabel James 31:04

Yeah, I think I'm really looking forward to it. Top Tips coming all of our ways, which will be great.

Daisy McAndrew 31:09

Thank you so much if you have rated or reviewed our show, it's been great to see the value that so many have gained from Age & Stage already. But if you haven't, leaving a review, can recommend new listeners to the show, and we would really appreciate you taking a moment to write a few words. And please do tell a friend who you think would benefit from hearing Age & Stage. Thank you so much, and we'll see you next time.