

5. Old-Fashioned Grandparents

Sam used to enjoy visiting her grandparents. Recently though, she has become increasingly uncomfortable with many of the differences between their values and hers.

Her grandfather routinely makes racist jokes while watching TV and routinely makes aggressive, insulting comments about LGBTQ people—especially when he sees transgender people represented in the media. Though these issues are important to Sam, she doesn't dare bring them up with her grandfather. Sam's grandmother clearly disapproves of many of her husband's offensive comments but would never directly challenge him. To Sam, this dynamic is problematic, too, and makes her feel less inclined to challenge him.

Sam also objects to her grandparents' apparent lack of concern for the environment. They buy cases of bottled water at a time and never recycle anything. Sam also thinks that they consume way too much meat and waste a ton of food. She is also bothered by the way that they maintain their large lawn—she objects to the water, fertilizer, and lawnmower gas that it takes to keep it looking lush and green. Sam has occasionally tried to do subtle things to get them to be more sustainable—she purchased them reusable grocery bags and water bottles, volunteered to take in their recycling, and offered to help them put in a vegetable garden or some lower-maintenance plantings in their yard. But none of these attempts had any effect. And she has never tried to explain to them why they should be more environmentally conscious.

Sam would love to have an open, respectful discussion with her grandparents about her views, but her parents think it would be rude. "You need to remember to respect your elders", they tell her. "Anyway, any discussion would be pointless; this is how they've always lived, and they are not going to change any time soon. You should just enjoy your time with them and try not to get so worked up about these things."

Sam disagrees. She thinks it is disrespectful to assume that older people are too set in their ways to be able to change. It is even more disrespectful to not even try to talk with them. Sam thinks that her grandparents—especially her grandmother—might be willing to hear what Sam has to say. "My grandparents might be more open-minded and willing to change than my parents give them credit for" she keeps thinking. "But if my parents are right, I don't know if I want to keep visiting my grandparents. Being at their house is not fun. It's actually quite upsetting."

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. When should (or shouldn't) we confront someone else for their behaviors or values that we think are morally problematic? How should (or shouldn't) we go about doing so?
2. If Sam's grandparents don't change, should Sam consider no longer visiting them? What factors should influence this decision?
3. What does it mean to "respect your elders"? Is it disrespectful to argue or disagree with one's elders about their values or behaviors? Why or why not?