(Approx. 431 words)

Helping Seniors Learn Computer Skills, Pt. 1

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As published in the Santa Monica Star

June 2021 issue, User Friendly

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Almost undoubtedly, you know someone who is struggling without computer skills – most likely an elderly parent, an aunt or uncle, grandparent, or friend.

I am a member of the Los Angeles Computer Society (LACS), a nonprofit group established in 1991 to help each other with computer and other technology skills. Several members are amazing. They are well into their 70s, 80s, and even 90s, learning to write computer code, repairing computers, installing and removing software and hardware, teaching computer skills, etc.

But several people I know outside the LACS have managed to learn basic email use, but little else. They are confused by websites, online purchasing, and they have not figured out how to use copy and paste and other basic computer skills. They may have a smartphone but do not understand texting or using email on their devices. And when phoned by these seniors, few people answer their phones anymore.

Can you imagine how it feels to be in your 70s/80s/90s, home alone or with another senior, and not understand how to go online to make an appointment to obtain a Covid vaccination? Using the phone for this is often frustrating because of long wait times followed by disconnection or even with the phone's battery dying, with the caller often giving up. And they cannot view photos of their family, including grandchildren, because they do not understand how to open an attachment? And remember, they have not even seen those young people in a year now.

When they attempt to acquire more computer skills, they encounter well-meaning relatives and friends who rattle off a lot of foreign terminology" browser" or "click on Firefox" (What's a Firefox?) or "go to the XXXX website." (What's a website? Can I take the bus there? What part of town is it in?). Or they say, "double click" or "right-click" or "highlight" this or that, "type in the field" or "go to your desktop" (What's a desktop on a computer?!) and a myriad of other completely foreign language terminology.

Eventually, those attempting to help become frustrated. And the student, still sharp and able to learn, feels embarrassed, ashamed, and stops asking for help.

This situation does not have to be. Before Covid (and hopefully after), there were several sources for help for seniors and others seeking assistance with technology. In addition, some simple guidelines and tips can make learning these new skills much easier.