

MANAGING DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS IN OLDER ADULTS

by Carolyn Michaelis-Moe with assistance from Julie Siri

Caring for an aging parent can be both rewarding and challenging. The challenges frequently come with the loved one's decreased ability to reason and increased difficult behaviors.

First of all, let's define what is a "difficult" parent or loved one. Does this mean a person who is not reasonable, not cooperative, or is not mentally competent? Has this behavior pattern been this person's normal behavior pattern throughout life, or is this just a recent development? Let's face it – some people are just ornery and have been all their life!

Has a physician checked the parent for any infections or other processes, like depression, which may be causing the behavior changes? Interestingly, we find that one of the earliest signs of bladder infection in the elderly is confusion – resembling dementia!

Are you, as the adult child in this case, satisfied with the assessment of this physician or would you like to have an exam by a specialist in older folks – a geriatrician. These physicians take seriously all symptoms and behavior changes in older folks, rather than dismissing it as "just old age".

See if anyone in the medical group your parent uses is "board certified" in geriatrics. Sometimes an internal medicine specialist or a family practice specialist will be "board certified" in geriatrics, but does not actually limit his/her practice to geriatrics.

If you don't know of a geriatrician in your area, call the county medical association and ask for referrals. Or call your local Geriatric Care Manager for referrals. (Don't know how to find one? Access the National Association for Professional Geriatric Care Manager's website to find your closest GCM – www.caremanager.org)

Once a physical cause has been ruled out, then a medical professional needs to determine if a diagnosis of dementia or depression exists. This publication has had many articles about dementia, so I am not going to take a lot of time discussing what dementia is and resources for it. However, if the mental assessment test indicates very low score then some of the decision-making options will need to be removed, just as you wouldn't allow your 4 year-old to determine whether he could play in the street! I say some, as the parent should still be allowed to make as many decisions as he/she can within a safe boundary.

You may ask, how do you get the stubborn or suspected-dementia patient in

to see the doctor? Sometimes that's tricky! Persuasion needs to take on every possible guise it can, to accomplish this goal! (A special meal or treat afterwards? A "prove it!" challenge? Pleading? Whatever!).

Worst case scenario, if you feel the parent is a danger to him/herself or to others (e.g., driving erratically), then you can threaten to or actually make a referral to Adult Protective Service. They will make a home visit and perform an evaluation and determine if the parent is safe on their own. Be prepared to fully inform them of all your concerns, as many people can be very "socially-appropriate" but not functional when on their own. Sometimes just informing the parent lovingly that you are so concerned that you are going to call the county to make an evaluation, but if they do it, they will appoint a conservator through the court – not a loving family member! This may be enough to help the parent see the benefits of cooperation!

Difficult behaviors can become destructive behaviors! Let's define destructive behavior. My interpretation of this would be doing things that could harm the parent or others – like driving dangerously or ignoring medical advice. For example: My father was convinced that my mother, who was prescribed oxygen by her lung doctor, did not actually need it, so father would sneak around and turn her oxygen down, so she "wouldn't become addicted"! It took all five of us kids confronting him to make him stop doing that. And I took him to one of her doctor appointments, told the doctor what he was doing, and the doctor told him how dangerous that would be!

Other difficult behaviors include:

- Aggression toward caregivers
- Driving without a license or beyond the level of current capabilities
- Buying beyond one's means
- Entering sweepstakes that promise to pay all his/her debts
- Hoarding – this can be anything, debris around the house, old food, etc
- Hiding or secreting pills rather than taking them.

Suggestions on ways to deal with difficult behaviors would include:

- Don't attempt to change everything at once. Pick one subject and work on that till you've achieved some success. Then start on something else.
- Enlist the assistance of a medical or psychological professional.
- Work with other of your siblings to create a united front to approach the difficult parent.

- Analyze the system that isn't working and see if there is an alternative that works better.
- Set up other alternatives to accomplish routine household chores (If the parent is driving a riding lawnmower in a dangerous way, get someone else to do the lawn on a regular basis.)
- Distraction – the art of getting your kids to think of something else when they see all the candy at the checkout counter – works for older adults also.
- Remember the thought processes in the older person may not be as fast as they were – nor the memory! Some lack of compliance may be actually a “cover-up” for “I don't want to tell you that I didn't remember to take my pills”.
- Let the parent reminisce, engage in life review, and remind them that their life has value. This will help them concentrate on the positive aspects of living rather than the deficits.
- Take time for meeting personal needs – or hire someone to come in once a week and give a massage, a foot soak, a pedicure, a manicure, a hot shave for an older man (like the old fashioned barber shops used to give!). This will help them feel pampered and valued and re-direct their attention.
- If there is a concern that the person's driving is a hazard, the state DMV allows you to call in anonymously and request a driving test be given to the older person. The DMV is responsible for revoking the driver's license. Make sure there are alternative means of getting groceries, running errands, etc.
- If you feel that the parent is a victim of scams by mail or phone, alert your county Adult Protective Service. Change the phone number or make the phone number unlisted. You may even have to cancel credit cards that the person is using to buy Canadian lottery tickets or some other get-rich-quick deal.

And lastly, don't forget professional geriatric care managers are experienced and ready to help families with parents who need assistance in dealing with the problems of aging. Sometimes just a consultation visit with a GCM can help clarify issues and give you some helpful hints in approaching your specific problem. Call the *National Association for Professional Geriatric Care Managers* at (520) 881-8008 for professionals in your area. You can go to Vital Connections on the web at www.vitalco.net for easy links to this and many other caregiver resources and services.

Carolyn Michaelis-Moe, RN, MPA owns Parent Care Management Services, the largest geriatric care manager company in the San Bernardino/Riverside area. Her professional staff includes a certified nurse-gerontologist, social worker, RN's and administrative assistants who help with many areas of care management. Carolyn is a member of the NAPGCM, and holds degrees in nursing and in administration. Her 30+ years of experience in home health, hospice, and administration have given her many skills with which to help her clients. She and her staff have assisted over 130 sets of parents and their loved ones with difficult decisions.

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MORE RESOURCES:

Depression:

National Mental Health Association 1-800-969-NMHA or www.nmha.org

American Psychiatric Association 1-800-35-PSYCH or www.psych.org

National Institute on Aging Information Center 1-800-222-2225 or www.nih.gov/nia

Geriatricians:

See your local county medical society for referrals

Contact the American Medical Association 1-800-621-8335 or www.ama-assn.org

Manual on Parent Care:

Parent Care – A Survival Guide for Adult Children of Aging Parents may be purchased from AGE Consultants in Phoenix for \$24.95 plus shipping and handling at 1-877-331-8105

Newsletter:

Caregivers Home Companion – monthly, discussing such topics as *How to Deal with a Parent Who Knows How to Push Your Buttons!* This is a commercial “newsletter”.

Subscriptions are available at 1-800-308-3136 or www.caregivershome.com, beginning at \$19.95 per year.

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