

Robinsons on Parallel Caregiving the Elderly

The relationship between the caregiver and the elderly is one of unique and special importance. As time marches on in the elder person's life, attention seeking, grieving at the myriad of losses, and feelings of inadequacy plus the loss of power and control may take over. Then interesting behaviors begin as elder persons seek to regain the attention and power they feel they have lost.

Bill Linden, our "Aging from an Adlerian Prospective" professor at the International Adlerian School, shared the GOALS OF BEHAVIOR FOR THE ELDERLY from Dr. Becky LaFountain, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Pennsylvania State University, Hershey, PA.

Four Mistaken Goals of the Elderly were discussed with the messages conveyed and some helpful Caregiver Responses. The four Mistaken Goals are UNDUE ATTENTION, POWER, REVENGE, and ASSUMED INADEQUACY.

When a caregiver notices that an elderly person seems to be seeking UNDUE ATTENTION, he or she is saying, "I only count when you pay attention to me." The caregiver feels annoyed or irritated. Instead of giving more attention and reinforcing the unhealthy feeling, here are some ideas for the caregiver to try:

- ✓ Involve the adult in a useful task or activity
- ✓ Establish boundaries and maintain routine
- ✓ Develop the courage to say "no"
- ✓ Say what you will and will not do for them
- ✓ Tell them you love them and are currently busy
- ✓ Involve the adult in a useful task or activity
- ✓ Have fun and spend quality time together
- ✓ Avoid special service; don't take responsibility for their happiness or unhappiness
- ✓ Listen (Be careful not to reinforce the undue attention getting)
- ✓ Ignore inappropriate behavior and comments
- ✓ Use natural and logical consequences
- ✓ Look for solutions
- ✓ Hold family meetings in which everyone has a say

When a caregiver notices that the elderly person is going after POWER and is in effect saying: "I only count when I win," the caregiver feels angry or frustrated. The caregiver is then tempted to argue, dominate or gain control. Here are some additional ideas to try to the above suggestions:

- ✓ Withdraw from the power struggle
- ✓ Offer choices
- ✓ Use action, not words "Be firm yet kind."

- ✓ Invite cooperation
- ✓ Do something unexpected
- ✓ Use distraction

If the caregiver notices that the elderly person seems to be seeking the mistaken goal of revenge, in effect saying, “I only count when I can hurt you,” the caregiver feels hurt or betrayed. Instead of responding with retaliation or returning pain, here are some **additional ideas** to the above ideas to try:

- ✓ Show empathy; acknowledge hurt feelings
- ✓ Build trust
- ✓ Attempt to restore the relationship
- ✓ Share your own feelings
- ✓ Make amends
- ✓ Encourage strengths
- ✓ Attempt to avoid hurt feelings
- ✓ Avoid punishment and retaliation

Should the caregiver observe that the elder person is feeling inadequate, sending the message that “I don’t count so there is no point in trying.” The caregiver himself or herself feels defeated or hopeless and is tempted to give up or do nothing; here are **some recommendations to be added to the above suggestions:**

- ✓ Provide encouragement
- ✓ Be persistent; don’t give up
- ✓ Stop all criticism
- ✓ Focus on strengths
- ✓ Break tasks down into small steps

The reader may have noticed that **each set of recommendations is built on the others.** The entire list of ideas incorporates encouragement and **treating the elderly with the respect and dignity** they deserve. The caregiver so many times has multiple responsibilities and may find the caregiving task for the elderly to be a tremendous challenge.

Often there is great love and concern for the elderly person and powerful motivation to be kind and caring through the elder’s last years on this earth. Knowing what to do and how to handle the challenge in a compassionate way is the goal. The suggestions above will give the caregiver some respectful and responsible ideas to try.

Information for this article was taken from “Goals of Behavior for the Elderly,” handout material from ICASSI, July, 2012. The handout was adapted from Horton-Parker and Fawcette (2007) and made use of the Positive Discipline Materials, provided by Becky LaFountain, Ph.D. Penn State University.