

How to Deal with Mom's
Complaints

THE ONE MINUTE CAREGIVER



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By Benjamin Pearce

A complaint is not always a criticism. It is not always a simple matter to identify the real problem behind a complaint. Loved ones may be experiencing difficulty adjusting to the aging process which may also be complicated by feelings of rejection and guilt.

It is important to distinguish between people who may upset from those who are just being difficult. When a reasonable person gets upset she may have momentary lapses of unreasonableness, but she is basically rational and reasonable. But some difficult people have a psychological need to get attention by disruptive and negative means. They are chronically hard to communicate with and may have lived their entire life this way. It is almost as if they live in a constant storm moving around in a vortex of anxiety from one place to the next. They seek satisfaction through validation and solicit the support of others. When family members are pulled into their storm, they are at risk of losing their perspective as they become caught-up in the turmoil. When we lose our perspective, we also lose our objectivity and become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. While storms may come and go, people tend to hang around, and if it isn't one thing, soon it will be

something else. If this behavior continues, family members will begin to exhibit creative avoidance which can further isolate the difficult person making matters worse. Learn to shield yourself from criticism so that you can maintain your objectivity and continue to be supportive.

Sometimes the best way to satisfy her is to clearly communicate the limits of what can or cannot be done for her. If you are firm and confident in your interaction with your family member they will respect you more than if your response is ambiguous. If you have the reputation for quick, courteous responses to her complaints, she will be more apt to begin her conversations with you rationally. When people scream and yell it's often because that's what they have had to do to in the past to get results. How your mother's concerns are handled will set the stage for how she may behave towards you in the future. Encourage your mother to complain, the act of complaining can both open communication lines, give you the opportunity to address her concerns and actually build consensus.

People can become upset for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the real source of their problem is difficult to isolate, and other times it may be justified. Either way, in working to resolve their problem it

helps to understand what may set them off. People may become upset because:

They have an expectation that may have not been met. You or someone else promised her something that was not delivered, or has changed. They may have made a wrong assumption about what someone would do for her. It is critical that family members do not make promises that do not reflect reality. Never over promise and under deliver.

They may already be upset at someone or something else that may be beyond your control. They may be tired, sick, stressed, frustrated, or felt abandoned. They may feel like a victim as personal power or influence in their life seems to erode with age or disability.

Sometimes they will use any excuse to prove that they are right, regardless if they are or not. They may be walking around with a chip on their shoulder, or may have deep rooted prejudices. You can not undo a lifetime of misunderstanding by being a martyr now, just do your best to care for her and listen.

Someone else may have been rude, indifferent, or discourteous to her. They may have been told one thing by one family member and something else by another. They may have acted on something that they were told by a family member that was wrong. They may have been embarrassed about doing something incorrectly, or had their integrity or honesty questioned.

They may be experiencing some short-term memory loss, which is normal, and they may be afraid to admit it to others, or her.

They may have a real and valid complaint.

Annoyances that a person usually tolerates become intolerable when that individual is upset. While you can't control another person's behavior, you can adjust your behavior to avoid escalating theirs. Don't react, respond to difficult situations. A good example of this is when you go to your Doctor's office and he tells you that your body is reacting to the medicine, it has a very negative connotation. However, if he reports that you are responding to the medicine, it's good news. We react when our immediate instincts take charge, we respond when we listen, consider the alternatives, and develop a workable solution to a difficult situation.

Upset people will be looking for a variety of responses from you. She will want to be taken seriously and treated with respect. She will not respond well to condescension or arrogance. She will expect immediate action. She will not want you to "look into it", she will want you to do something right now. Inform your family member that corrective action will be taken, or other appropriate measures to reassure her that you understand the seriousness of her concern. Sometimes, she just wants to know that her complaint will somehow make a difference and that some action has or will be put into motion, so that she will not have this problem again. Most of all, angry people want attention and want to be heard. If she feels neglected, or ignored, she may go to great lengths to make her point. Great care must be taken not to

patronize the errant person as they already may feel vulnerable in their condition. It is important not only to focus on what she is saying, but how she may be saying it. She may not say she's angry, but her voice conveys it loudly and clearly. Listen carefully for emotions as well as facts.

Family members can quickly discern if you are paying attention to them or not. If they were mildly agitated before, your inattention can push them to anger. The upset family member may call you names, curse, or say unpleasant things about you, your spouse, or your children. Avoid letting them "push your buttons", because when they get to you, you can lose your objectivity, and you need to be in control if you're going to find a solution to the situation.

Repeat, or paraphrase what you understand that they said.

Sometimes hearing you say it makes it sound worse than it really is and they will frequently back down a bit. At the very least they will know that you are really listening to them.

Handling complaints involves much the same process as is employed by sales people to overcome objections. People want to be heard and empathized with. Tell them that you understand how they could feel that way. Validate their concerns by admitting that it is likely other seniors have felt the same way. And finally offer an explanation that has been acceptable to others. "What they have found is that... your explanation has helped to clarify things so that they understand more fully. The feel, felt, found technique acknowledges the family member's feelings, substantiates their concern and offers a solution. If you need advice, don't be afraid to consult with professional social workers who deal with similar

problems every day. Always remember to be consistent in your responses. Consistency of response will be tested by her and consistency equals credibility.

Sometimes the hardest thing for the caregiver to say is no, and mean it. It is much easier to relent to a critical family member's demands to get them off your back, but you may pay for it later. It is usually better to say no to request if you are unsure if it is possible. This will buy you some time to hopefully resolve their problem in their favor and surprise them. If you say you will "look into it", there is no closure. You are accepting the responsibility to follow-up personally, and run the risk of rejection if you are unable to deliver on their request.

Family members who are not satisfied, or become frustrated with your inability to resolve their concerns reasonably, will seek validation through other family members or friends. In extreme cases, these situations can deteriorate into conflict. When communication lines break down, people will seek other alternatives to make their point. They may attempt to coerce other family members to support their cause, and create unintentional division in the family. It is always critical for family members not directly involved in the daily care giving to discuss Mother's concern privately with those who are, this way siblings can find solutions together then inform Mother. This way the group decision can appear final and will be difficult to for her to refute.

Offensively manage your Mother's expectations and opinions. Recognize her contributions around the home by soliciting her opinions about family matters, grandchildren and friends. Also share pertinent information with her about things that you have learned researching eldercare, assisted living, new medications, and community events. Sometimes it may be helpful to jot down her complaints or concerns and your solutions to them so that you can refer to them when they resurface. Don't be afraid to say " I don't know, or I don't have the answer right now" - rather tell her "that's a good question, I'll find an answer for you and get back to you tomorrow". Don't be afraid to share your own problems and never cover anything up. Family members should be encouraged to also recognize the inherent value in positive reinforcement for you as well.

People tend to avoid conflict because it is a stress producer. Real problems just don't go away. Caregivers who avoid dealing with issues as they arise run the risk of escalation of the issue. Left unchecked, they can ultimately get out of control and involve massive amounts of unproductive time to resolve. When conflict arises, deal with it quickly so that it doesn't bring you down. You need to remain energized and positive if you are to provide the best care for her.

Mom may also be complaining because she is bored, lonely, and is lacking stimulation. Sometimes people create their own stimulation. Many families have recognized the inherent benefits that a social environment like assisted living can provide. Sure she will complain about you "putting her away", but once she's there

for awhile and makes some friends and has things to do with her day, the quality of her life will improve. No matter how much care you give her at home you will never be able to provide her the stimulation that she will get in an assisted living community. Not to mention the emotional benefit she'll receive from shifting the focus of her life from her own limitations to a stimulating social setting, with activities and entertainment.

Finally, it's natural to feel attacked personally when your Mother is really upset with her health, her finances, a sibling or spouse, or even herself. They are lashing out at whatever is near, in this case its you. More often than not, her problem was not caused by you, remind yourself of this. Sometimes the mistake may have been your fault. We all make mistakes, experience teaches us to recognize them when we make them again! It will often disarm Mother if you admit that it was your fault and apologize.

Further Reading

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