

FOCUSING ON SENIORS

Behaviors

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If you have been or are a care giver or if you have a friend or loved one in a care center, I am sure at one time or another you have questioned the behavior of that person. Why does he/she act that way? Is there something I can do to help eliminate or lessen the behavior? If a person has suffered a stroke, has advanced stages of some debilitating disease or has dementia the person may not be able to tell you why he/she is acting in a peculiar or disturbing manner.

Difficult behaviors are very common but it may take a little patience or detective work on your part to discover the source. Some questions you might ask are: Is there some undiagnosed pain that you are not aware of? Has there been a change in the routine? Has there been more noise or commotion in the environment? Has the person moved from a home situation to a care center? Has the person moved from one home to another home? Has the person recently fallen that might be causing some disorientation? Could their Alzheimer's or dementia be progressing?

Of course, knowing the cause will not eliminate the behavior, but it will help you know how you might possibly respond when a particular behavior is displayed.

Some important reactions you might want to keep in mind are: don't argue, don't correct, don't take it personally, try to redirect the person, remain calm, ask someone else to step in so you can remove yourself from the situation, treat the person as an adult even if childish behaviors are being displayed, and remember that what you do today may not work tomorrow. Of course, these might be easier to read than to do! But it is always important to respect and continually remind yourself that if your loved one knew what he/she were doing, most likely the loved one would be quite apologetic or even embarrassed.

It is important when dealing with difficult behaviors to make eye contact. Let the person know that you are paying attention and that you are listening. You can also tell a lot by looking in the eyes of a person as to what kind of mood is present. It is also important to ask simple and direct questions if there is some compromising issue involved. Some elderly people no longer have the ability to process a complex thought or idea. Something I learned many years ago when dealing with other people is that I cannot change them but I can change my response and behavior as I deal with them.

Now that the holiday season is here, there are many activities taking place that we want our loved one to experience. But these activities are a change in the daily routine. There are additional people and sounds. There are special treats and smells. And however pleasing they are to us, to an elderly person it might be overwhelming. Your loved one may not be able to express that going home, which you believe is a special treat, might trigger a sense of loss because of not living at home; or the loss of a spouse who no longer is present; or the loss of the ability to chew and swallow those special holiday treats. A change in diet might trigger an upset stomach or constipation. A change in environment might make your loved one feel lost and unsure of where home is. An elderly person may not be able to tell you that all of the wonderful Christmas carols are nothing but noise because he/she can't hear or the hearing aids just accentuate the musical tones. There are no set ways to respond. Everyone is different. Everyone is special. You are different from your friend, your spouse or your parent. But no matter what, it is important that you try to respond with love and compassion and if that is not possible, please talk with someone who can help you through this journey. You don't have to be alone!

As an aside, I want to let you know that this is the last article I will be writing. My husband and I are moving at the end of December to Illinois where we will be closer to family. I have enjoyed writing these articles and I have enjoyed the residents and the families that I have worked with. My life has been blessed by the people I have met, worked and interacted with here in Conrad. But, the new social worker at PMC, Traci Woith, will be taking over this column so you can anticipate more articles Focusing on Seniors.