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**Five Ways to Manage Difficult Elders**

**By Phyllis Staff, Ph.D.**

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'You are old, Father William', the young man said,  
'And your hair has become very white;  
And yet you incessantly stand on your head ---  
Do you think, at your age, it is right?'  
Lewis Carroll (1865)

My grandmother was the original matriarch. When she barked "frog," the only acceptable response was "how high?" She was hard to deal with in her last days, surprising no one.

Not being the brightest penny in the family bag, I reacted emotionally to her complaints, judgments, and demands. Rather than leave immediately, I stood my ground, trying to defend my relatives and myself from her relentless attacks. As a result, we were not speaking when she died.

Had I understood what I was facing, had I tried to put myself in her shoes, our story could have had a better ending. In hopes that your story will have a more satisfying ending, I offer a few of the tricks for dealing with difficult elders I've learned since then.

1) Make a plan BEFORE a crisis

The best way to deal with difficult parents is to avoid as many problems as possible by planning how you will handle them before they arise.

Pick a time when ALL family members can meet in person or on a conference call to discuss what you will do when a family member needs help. Take the focus off elderly

family members by fully including them in the planning and making certain they have a role to play.

Be sure to take notes! Share them with all family members to verify your family agreements. In difficult situations, you might want to ask family members to sign and return a copy of any agreement.

Here are a few of the issues you may want to address:

Physical Location

How will you help a family member when they live in another town?

Can you be an effective long-distance caregiver, and, if so, how?

If not, who will move, and when should that move happen?

Roles

Who will be responsible for what?

Will you share expenses equally, or will you balance money versus time contributions?

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What will happen when there are disagreements?

How will you handle changes in individual circumstances?

How will you react to threats to health and safety?

Differentiate preferences and requirements. If it's more than a preference that family members not live together, get it out on the table before a crisis erupts.

Document Planning

Where will you store important documents such as

Wills,

Power of attorney,

Insurance policies, and

Deeds of trust.

Who will have access to these documents? And under what circumstances?

### 2) Stretch your patience muscle

Remember your excitement when you crossed the threshold of adulthood? When you first got a driver's license? When you got your first job? When you found your first apartment and could decorate it all on your own? Then think about how you would feel if you had to give up adult privileges, one by one. What you're feeling now may closely approximate the feelings of your difficult parent. But your elder's feelings cannot be imagined away.

Your difficult parent may fear

·Becoming invisible;

·Seeing themselves as useless or stupid;

·Losing their friends;

·Losing physical abilities;

·Becoming dependent.

By imagining yourself in their place, you may react more sympathetically and suitably.

### 3) Forget "Parenting Your Parent"

One of the least helpful ideas in our current culture is the notion that as your parents age, you become their parent. Stuff and Nonsense! You are NOT your parent's parent, nor will you ever be. Your role may be friend, confidant, caregiver, and supporter, but when you take the role of parent, you diminish your elder by reducing them to the position of child. No wonder they react negatively. Wouldn't you?

### 4) Use behavior modification techniques

Behavior modification has gotten a bad rap of late, probably due to the many ways in which its principles have been misused. However, used properly, behavior modification techniques can remove unpleasant behaviors and return sanity to your family.

If you don't know the basics of behavior modification, here is a site that can bring you up to speed quickly:

<http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/behsys/behmod.html>

A few tips to help you begin

Before you begin, you must clearly define what outcome you want to achieve. For example, you find that you are spending an increasing amount of time waiting for your elder to get ready for an outing. If you want your elder to be on time, make that the specified outcome.

Identify your elder's positive reinforcers. Clearly they do not respond to your annoyance (or are you even allowing your irritation to show?), but they do enjoy outings.

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Tie the outcome to the reinforcer in a clear statement, for example, "If you are ready at 10:15, we will go shopping."

Shape the behavior you want. If your elder is habitually 30 minutes late, it is unlikely that they will suddenly be on time. So, decide in advance to shape their behavior. For example, you may choose to wait 20 minutes. If they are not ready, leave without them. Once that behavior has been established, wait only 10 minutes, then only five. By using this tactic, you will arrive at the outcome you desire with a minimum of pain.

Punishment. Punishers can work – if they are severe and immediate. However, they increase the likelihood that you'll get results you didn't anticipate or want! Locking someone in a room or closet is punishment. Don't go there!

Extinction. Use extinction techniques rather than punishers to get rid of unwanted behaviors. Extinction is simple. Offer no reaction to bad behavior. Don't talk about it. Don't react to it. Leave the room, leave the house if you must. But remove the opportunity for reinforcement of such behaviors.

Be aware that it will take time for extinction techniques to carry out your goal. Also realize that the frequency of the undesirable behavior may actually increase while extinction is occurring. Be patient and resolved. You'll get there if you don't weaken.

5) Identify your own contribution to difficult parents and difficult families

Perhaps the most difficult (and perhaps the most useful) technique is to identify your own contribution to the problem, and stop it!

·Are you taking the course of least resistance and putting up with undesirable behavior because it's too difficult to change it.

·Do you avoid conflict at all costs?

·Could you be afraid to give up your position as "favorite" or "good?"

·Do you feel emotionally superior when you deny your own needs to attend to those of others?

Any of these may lead to more difficulties in the future, so give them up. Decide what you can do within reason, and do that. If you need help, ask for it. You can deal with the problems of difficult parents and difficult families if you are willing.

copyright 2003 by Phyllis Staff, Ph.D. – Phyllis Staff is an experimental psychologist and the CEO of The Best Is Yet.Net, an internet company that helps seniors and caregivers find trustworthy residential care. She is the author of How to Find Great Senior Housing: A Roadmap for Elders and Those Who Love Them. She is also the daughter of a victim of Alzheimer's disease. Visit the author's web site at <http://www.thebestisyet.net>.

### **Long Distance Caregiving for a Loved One is Particularly Difficult**

**By Linda LaPointe**

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Long Distance Caregiving for a Loved One is Particularly Difficult

## Five Ways to Manage Difficult Elders

The phone rang at 5 a.m. John was sure it couldn't be good news at that hour. He was right. Mom's neighbors were calling him from 850 miles away in Texas to say that she was out watering her roses an hour ago on a cold, early spring morning. John knew that she had been failing. She wasn't the same Mom he could always count to stand by him. Now he needed to stand by her. But how?

Families are now living further apart from each other. This is difficult because your elders require ever-increasing assistance, yet the distance between you makes it difficult to perform the tasks of a primary caregiver. But most elders are reluctant to leave their home of many years to move to the town in which their adult children live. This reluctance can become a stressful point of contention between adult children and their parent(s).

Often, it is a financial issue. In-home care and assisted living can be much more expensive in New York or California than in the center of the country. Resources simply may not stretch as far to allow one to live as one chooses. Regardless of the reasons, many adult children find themselves far away and concerned that parents are not doing as well as they may insist in those telephone visits. There are some ways to help manage long distance caregiving. +Try to visit as soon as possible to assess the situation. Take notes of possible problem areas and gather information about senior resources in their area. +Make sure legal and financial affairs are in place. Keep copies of important papers and telephone numbers of contacts. +Plan ahead to have back up providers to care for your own family in case you need to make an unexpected visit to your relative. It is also a good idea to bank some vacation or sick days from work for these visits as well. +Seek the assistance of a Professional Care Manager specializing in assessing and monitoring the needs of the elderly. +Consider all the options before moving your relative, but begin talking with them about this possibility. You could be surprised to learn they are willing to move closer to you, but they never mentioned this for fear of burdening you with their problems. +Retain a copy of the Yellow Pages that serves your parent's community. The next time your parent calls and you need to locate resources, you won't need to search out numbers or call information long-distance.

When you live hundreds of miles away from an aging loved one, there is a constant level of anxiety over his or her welfare. Every family must make their own decisions about how to handle the situation. Dr. Mary Pipher, in her book *Another Country, Navigating the Emotional Terrain of our Elders* makes a convincing argument for having the aging parent(s) move near the adult child who will, or currently handles their financial or care decisions. It is an option that should be given much consideration. Be sure to have a contact person who lives close to the parent periodically checking on their health and cognitive status. Better yet, also have someone who can act upon your and her or his behalf until you can.

Linda LaPointe, MRA, has helped hundreds of families as an ElderLife Matters consultant and national educator. Find free informational articles, exercises, links, audio interviews and products to help families experiencing elder issues at her website

Long Distance Caregiving for a Loved One is Particularly Difficult  
Be Smart In How You Deal With Your Fears And Anxieties  
You're How Old?!?

## Five Ways to Manage Difficult Elders

Healed Using Hands, Anointing Oil And Prayer  
Solitary Confinement -- for Life

Success Secrets  
Rolodex Pro Contact Manager Software  
147 Killer Epublishing Strategies  
Scams Exposed  
Baby's First Year --What Parent Needs To Know



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