



When parents complain: Managing your own steam valve

By Bart J. Mindszenty, APR, Fellow CPRS

Amazing. My mother has now been a resident in her nursing home for more than four years, and she turned 93 a few months ago. Statistically, she's beating all the odds on all fronts. Her dementia emerges steadily, but slowly and unevenly.

For her age, she looks remarkably well. And as she sometime chooses, my mother will engage anyone in discourse in either English or Hungarian. And she's already beaten the average longevity in a nursing home, which is three years.

A litany of complaints

So while she's ahead of the averages, she is, nonetheless, on par or possibly even leading with an elderly parent's ability to assign blame and express seemingly never-ending complaints.

"No!" The past months, my mother's new favourite word is "no." However, for maximum effectiveness, it must be expressed with a



Photos: Chris Noone

Visits from her lifelong friend, Clara Imregh, keep my mother in a generally positive mood.

certain level of venom, total displeasure and rejection, and accompanied with a rather rapid turning away of the head, as if dodging whatever the ugly thing before her might be.

She uses the "no" word very well, mostly when she doesn't like her food, which occurs at almost a predictably cyclical rate.

Every couple weeks, my mother just simply will not like the food she liked in the last cycle of the same meals. And no matter what anyone says or does, my mother responds with yet another emphatic and loud "no"!

I used to get really irritated with her absolute and relentless rejection of foods and things. In fact, it still bugs me, but I think I now better understand her moods and expressions.

I believe her one syllable word of rejection is just that: I've had enough, I don't like this, I'm done.

So her new helper and I are backing off and just accepting that sometimes a "no" is indeed just that.

"Where have you been?" Another classic tool, this burning question asked every few days with intense passion and concern is one I now can manage consistently. I am now able to deflect the question with something about being in meetings. More often than not, that excuse mollifies her. Or sometimes I weave a long, complex story about the events of the past day that have kept me so busy. And I always end whichever approach with something like: "But remember when I was here just yesterday, we... (insert a good activity). Remember?" Sadly, more often than not my mother doesn't remember now, nor does she want to look like she can't remember. So she acknowledges that she remembers, and then we move on.

"I don't feel well!" This sentence is always tough to gauge. My mother does the I-don't-feel-well line every few weeks, and so I'm never certain if something is wrong or if this is one of her tools to make me stay longer.

So I do a probe session. In other words, I ask questions and wait for answers that sometimes come and sometimes don't. But I have to be careful how I ask the question: like a pollster, I can't be leading her toward the desired response, like asking "You're feeling okay, aren't you?"

My method is to ask a series of questions; for instance, "Is this about pain somewhere?" If she says yes, I run through a list of body parts, like asking if something hurts in her head, arms, legs, back, chest, and so on. This usually works, and more often than not, when asked part by part, the eventual outcome is that there's no physical pain.

Next I ask about her mood and her mindset. This is a bit more difficult, but I ask if she sees anything bad in the picture screen in her mind. I ask if there is a memory that is bothering her, or if she feels disoriented. I probe to see if something is just bothering her—something that she might explain, or might not.

Often, the very exercise of asking questions and giving her the attention she craves is enough to make her feel better. But sometimes there is some kind of pain. It might be from the discomfort of a recent bowel movement, which we recognize the way she frequently leans forward. Or sometimes it's just being irritated by one of her fellow residents who happens to be having a demanding, expressive, no-holds-barred bad hair day.

Keeping your cool

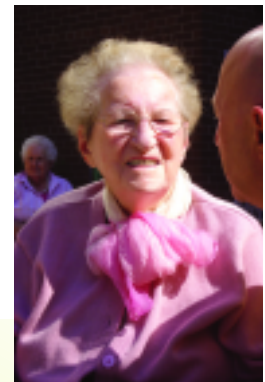
Thus, the challenge for family, friends and paid caregivers is to really know and understand the elderly person. The complaints are inevitable. Our job has to be able to sort through all the actions and words and signals and determine what's real and what's not; what's a threat, and what's just a major elder hissy-fit.

We also must recognize and respect the reality that our aging loved ones complain for several good reasons and perhaps lots of bad ones. They complain mainly because they want attention, but also because many times they are in discomfort. Problem is, they often can't express the nature of the discomfort anymore. And that's why we have to second-guess and third-guess by listening, probing and observing. Usually, we'll find the right answer, which will allow us to take the right action. ●

Bart J. Mindszenty, APR, FCPRS, is a regular contributor to Solutions magazine and co-author of Parenting Your Parents, now in its second edition.

"I think we invented language to satisfy our deep need to complain."

Lily Tomlin



Points to ponder when your parents gripe

- Is your loved one a natural complainer? Is there a history of the cup being half empty more often than half full?
- Is your parent feeling safe, comfortable and stable in this setting? If so, what factors are causing the complaints?
- What might cause your parent concern or trepidation that can lead to ongoing complaints?
- What do you need to find or ask to better understand the causes for complaining?
- If the complaints are consistent and agitated and clearly affecting your loved one negatively, ask a geriatric psychiatrist to assess your parent.