

Overcoming Resistance with Your Aging Parent(s)

We can count on only two things – the will to change and fear of change. It is the will to change that motivates us to seek help. It is the fear of change that motivates us to resist the very help we seek.

– Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.
Fear and Other Uninvited Guests

Change is difficult for most of us. It often means moving on and leaving something behind — a place, a person, a routine or a job. Sometimes even ideas you've held fast to for a long time. It is not unusual for others to see a need for change in someone else's life before the person sees that their situation has become unworkable or unsafe.

So it is with many older adults; they perceive the appropriateness of their living situations, activities and daily routines through rose-colored glasses, seeing a distorted view of their own lives. Often, adult children are the first to come to the realization that mom or dad (or both) is not functioning as adequately in their own home as they used to.

You may be like most adult children; you hope your parents, as they age, will make sound decisions about their lives on their own. You want them to recognize their limitations and make necessary adjustments as smoothly as possible.

But if your parents don't observe their needs and make changes, you might expect that just telling them what you think they should change about their lives will be enough to get them moving in the "right" direction. After all, you are suggesting these changes out of love and a desire to reciprocate some of the caring they have given you all your life. Your ideas are for their own good and should naturally be reasonable to them. For example, you may sit down to a heart-to-heart talk and explain that it is time for your dad to stop getting on the roof to hang holiday lights, clean the gutters or use a ladder for any reason. Or that it's time for your mom to stop driving, or time for them both to move to a facility that can care for their daily needs.

Well, rarely is any discussion about change easy, especially when suggestions come from someone else and imply that you are less capable than you want to be. However, it is often up to adult children to broach difficult subjects and recommend changes, large and small. But be prepared. Despite your love and concern, your parents may respond with a lot of resistance. What is logical to you may be tantamount to "giving up" to them.

Once a parent, always a parent. Your mom and dad may be entrenched in that identity; the idea of reversing roles with you feels degrading and wrong. You, the "giver," may feel very frustrated, rejected and even angry by their response. Loving reciprocity is the furthest thing from their sense of personal order – "I'm the parent, you're the child," is their psychological mantra. Even if your mom lives under your roof, she may still resist your suggestions. Here are some tips to make it easier to deal with resistance and find successful solutions for everyone involved.

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Overcoming Resistance with Your Aging Parent(s) (cont'd)

What you can do!

1. Be patient! Keep in mind that change will occur slowly, in small steps.
2. Try to avoid drastic changes all at once whenever possible
3. Keep a respectful attitude
4. Maintain clear communication (LISTEN to the concerns expressed and try to address them), explore options....
5. Acknowledge their fears/concerns and talk about what might ease their mind
6. Keep things in perspective
7. Let go of things that don't really matter
8. Don't get in a power struggle, be flexible and try to listen to the core concerns being expressed

Continued Resistance

Sometimes your parents will insist on keeping things the way they are no matter how respectful or creative you are at introducing the idea of change. You feel the situation is on the track towards disaster — but, from your mom's point of view, things are just fine.

- Remember, people make choices and take risks every day..Just because you're older doesn't mean you can't take risks anymore...
- Your parents have a right to make risky choices (not hire help, not move, not see the doctor, not taking medication etc) as long as they are mentally competent to understand and weigh the risks. *If you think your parent has dementia or you question if he or she can fully understand the risks, seek help from a professional like a geriatric care manager.*
- Keep in mind, your older family member has survived many years and has had to develop endurance, faith, resourcefulness, and creativity to get through life...these traits can sustain your parent through difficult times.
- ***You may just have to sit with the fact that your parent won't change until a serious crisis occurs.*** Once a crisis happens, a fractured hip for example, there are no more choicesyour mom will go to a nursing home for rehab and then may be forced to live in a more restrictive environment if she doesn't recover fully

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How a geriatric care manager can help you!

There are a number of ways a geriatric manager can help you, your parents and your whole family cope with these potentially difficult situations. She is skilled and available to:

- Act as a guide in helping you and your parents understand the situation and slowly make important changes
- Facilitate family meetings and care conferences with physicians
- Discuss various care options with your family and help you evaluate services and compare costs of different options
- Develop a care plan and make recommendations that take into consideration your parent's strengths, limitations, finances, concerns and desires
- Help you set up a system that makes sure that all bills are paid on time.
- Evaluate your parent for cognitive impairment. If your mom's impairment is mild, it may still be possible to honor her choices but put some safety measures in place, for example monitoring devices, medication reminder systems and companionship visitors to make certain things are okay.

And most of all, a care manager can help everyone in your family feel like you all have the support you need to do your best. She can also help you feel less like you are floating around in a challenge that can be personal and painful for everyone.

