

The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

5 Tips To Improve Your Relationship With The Older Loved One You Care For

When you're a caregiver for an older loved one, whether you're their child, spouse, relative or friend, your relationship often takes on a new dynamic as your responsibilities change. In some cases, your relationship may become stronger, but in others, the stresses of caregiving may have a negative effect.

If you're struggling to maintain a good relationship with a loved one, here are some tips that may help you repair your bond:

1. Take a break

Often, a lack of time to yourself can make you feel exhausted and unhappy. These negative emotions can lead you to resent your loved one. Giving yourself a break can reduce these stressful feeling and give you time to check in with your emotions. Look for places in your schedule you can spend on relaxing activities, hobbies, or rest. It can help to ask someone else to step in to briefly take over your loved one's care for the day or find a local program that supports caregiver respite.

2. Improve communication

If you and your loved one aren't communicating well, it can sour the relationship quickly. Consider:

- Being patient and waiting for your loved one to finish speaking before responding
- Checking your tone, and avoiding raising your voice
- Being respectful and using careful phrasing when bringing up difficult topics
- Considering your loved one's mood and delaying conversations that can wait for when your loved one isn't tired, upset, in pain or stressed
- Sharing any negative feelings with a close friend or relative instead of releasing anger on your loved one

3. Listen to what your loved one wants

Often, a loved one may disagree with your caregiving decisions, which may lead them to feel frustrated. When possible, take a loved one's wants into consideration and respect their values. Ask yourself "What matters most to my loved one?" Benjamin Rose Institute on Aging's SHARE for Dementia program outlines five common values that guide the kind of care older adults wish to receive:

- Remaining independent
- Having personal safety
- Continuing to participate in important activities
- Not being a burden on family and other loved ones
- Having a say in who is helping with what

Whichever of these things your loved one values the most, be sure to make it a priority and respect their wishes whenever possible.

4. Separate the person from the disease

When a loved one has a chronic health condition, especially dementia, so many things are out of their control. It is fine to be angry at the disease but taking it out on your loved one will only upset and confuse them.

5. Explore resources

If you are still struggling with your relationship with your loved one, don't be afraid to seek outside help. There are many caregiver support groups where you can discuss your concerns and frustrations with peers who may be experiencing similar challenges. Local services may also be able to help you find respite opportunities and additional help to take some of the burden off of you.

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Contact the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington at 360-694-8144 or ClarkADRC@dshs.wa.gov to learn more about supports available to family caregivers. Article content is provided by Active Daily Living.