

ELDER LAW REVIEW

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Tips for Handling Difficult Families

Dealing with difficult clients is something we've all experienced. However, sometimes it's not the clients, but their families who give you grief. Here are a few tips for the next time you are dealing with an argumentative son, a partner who regularly makes a scene, or an opinionated daughter.

#1: Change Your Perspective

When dealing with unpleasant caregivers or family members, try not to focus on changing their behavior. Instead, focus on changing your perspective and your attitude. Look beyond the demands and try putting yourself in their shoes, imagining how you would feel if their loved one was your loved one. Also try to see adult children as allies; after all, you both want the best for their parent.

#2: Actively Listen

Sometimes when a caregiver or family member is upset, they just need to vent. Actively listening to them may relieve some of their stress. If you are able to, stop what you are working on and listen to what is being said without thinking about how you want to respond. Then reiterate to them in your own words what you heard. Follow up by asking questions to clarify their concerns in an attempt to discover the root of the problem / situation. Sometimes, you will find they are feeling helpless over their loved one's situation rather than upset about the issue at hand.

#3: Be Professional

If a caregiver or family member is being difficult, know their outburst may have little to do with you or what you've done and more to do with their fear or anger. Try to avoid defending yourself or arguing with

them and make an attempt to detach emotionally. State your points calmly yet firmly as well as maintain open body language to show your readiness to listen. If you feel you are becoming emotional in the situation, take some deep breaths to calm yourself. It is always to the advantage of all parties to leave the room momentarily than to fight back. In some cases, ask a colleague to step in and help or handle the situation.

#4: Set Boundaries

Remember that listening to verbal abuse is not in anyone's job description. If a caregiver or family member is yelling at you for example, ask them to stop and let them know you will end the conversation and leave the room if their behavior doesn't change. Report and document this behavior as necessary.

#5: Avoid Getting Hooked

Along with setting boundaries, try to avoid getting into long, unproductive conversations with someone who is argumentative. Focus on keeping the conversation brief and to the point. Let the caregiver or family member know the amount of time you have available to talk. If they are drilling you with questions when you don't have the needed time to answer them, ask them to write their questions down to answer in one shot when you are available.

#6: Keeping Families Involved

Good communication can go a long way. Try to keep the caregivers or family members in the loop when necessary and applicable. And encourage them to do the same with you.

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