

TIPS FOR MANAGING THE DIFFICULT PATIENT AND FAMILY

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“When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but creatures of emotion.” --Dale Carnegie

Difficult patients and difficult families have two things in common; they want to be heard and understood. Remember, **communicating** clearly and often, both with the patient and their family is key to avoiding disagreements, conflicts and potential law suits. Families' expectations often can be unrealistic, especially if they do not have a clear understanding of the services the facility provides and the geriatric issues that have led to the placement of their loved one. If the families' expectations of care are beyond the reasonable capabilities of the facility, this may result in resentment and anger and lead to the potential of ongoing conflict and again, the potential of increased legal issues. Keep in mind that feelings of guilt complicate families' emotional reactions to the challenges that may occur while their loved one is a resident in your facility.

In dealing with difficult patients and family members, try to put yourself in their shoes. If a member of your family is in a care home and experiencing difficulty wouldn't you feel protective, need answers, and want to be informed? If you, as the patient, aren't feeling well, you are most likely to be cranky, rude to others, unsocial and just want to either lash out, be coddled or just left alone.

There a number of ways that these difficult situations can be handled. Before you respond or react to a situation **explore** what the patient or family member perceives the problem to be. It could be a misunderstanding, poor communication, or the need to educate the patient and family member about procedures or policies. This speaks to the critical importance of **educating** the family and patient regarding the policies and procedures of your facility and the emotional and physical changes that are seen in patients.

Think about it, when we feel angry or upset about something, what do we want? Most likely we want someone to listen and **validate** our feelings. That doesn't mean that we are agreeing with the substance of a particular issue, but we need to validate the person's frustration and feelings.

One of the simplest way to diffuse a difficult situation is to validate the patient's or family member's feelings. This can be done simply by being empathic, listening, being calm and non reactive. Let them vent. Avoid making excuses, and do not accept blame for something you or your facility did not do. When trying to diffuse the situation, don't say things like "I know how you feel." Instead your reply can be something like "I understand how this situation could make you feel very angry or upset." Another appropriate response might be "It seems that you have a valid reason to be upset about this." "What can I do to help the situation?" If you are uncomfortable and feel you need some guidance or support, reach out to your supervisor or appropriate coworker.

Anticipating the needs of the patient and family is a good way of avoiding conflict and disagreements. By keeping the family and patient informed and updated you can avoid unpleasant situations altogether. If applicable, always explain clearly and in terms the family and patient can understand the procedure or potential solution to the situation at hand. If you keep your patients and families **informed** about how things work in your facility and what they can expect to happen and when it will happen, you will alleviate many fears, stress and concerns about the unknown. This will also provide them with the reassurance and comfort of knowing you and your facility are competent and in control of the situation

While dealing with difficult situations with families can be taxing and emotional, it is important to know that most of the concerns are not directed personally at you. Always maintain an empathic and professional approach. Accept this as an extension of your primary role as a caregiver. Competence alone will not always be sufficient to satisfy the total needs of the “creatures of emotion.” Your understanding, communication, validation and anticipation of needs, both physical and emotional are essential to your successful management of patients and their families.

About the Author:

Marilynn W. Allemann is a highly qualified executive and personal coach, organizational consultant, trainer, and licensed clinical social worker. Following many years in the corporate environment and as a psychotherapist in private practice she founded Masters Executive Coaching. She has worked with leaders of organizations, management teams, sales executives and individuals since 1996. In her role as a coach Marilynn provides individual and executive team coaching and training in the areas of transitions, individual performance, career development, leadership, executive development and team and corporate performance. Marilynn brings a competent and collaborative approach to successfully working with her clients.

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