



As Children Become Caregivers

Human nature dictates that we often experience child-parent struggles. The blurring of identities as our parents advance in age and we become their caregivers frequently intensifies these struggles. This can create tremendous strain on our ability to manage the day-to-day stresses of these new roles. But there are some relatively simple ways to handle the changes in your relationship and make the transition easier on you both.

Simply stopping and counting to 10 before responding to your parent will afford you precious seconds to calm yourself and potentially avoid an unnecessary argument. Those moments of deep breathing and hesitation can also give you an opportunity to more fully understand your reactions to stresses in your relationship. This, in turn, will help you transform your fight-or-flight instincts into more positive responses that can ultimately strengthen and deepen your bond with your parent.

If your parent has a tendency to use verbal negative cues to trigger you into offering an angry response, consider turning the avoidance of these “hooks” into a personal contest. See how many times you can refuse to take the bait, considering each time you pass up a negative hook an internal private victory. Understand that the best way to win an argument is by peacefully and calmly ending the discussion altogether.

Sometimes old patterns and routines can lead to falling into the same old traps and ruts. Try changing things up with new scenery and unexpected activities. This might refresh your outlook and help you and your parent see each other in a different, more compatible light where communication is easier and calmer. Along these same lines, introduce your parent to the adult you by involving them in your work, professional interests and colleagues if possible. By helping them see you as an adult instead of a child, it may be easier to break the old parent-child trap and talk *with* one another rather than *at* each other.

As your parents age, it’s important to maintain an open mind about your interactions with them. Understand that the aging process is difficult on them as well. Their lives are changing, as is yours, and these changes are often frightening and complicated. The fewer expectations you have on your relationship, the easier it will be to remain flexible and adaptive as you both journey through this unfamiliar territory. To remind yourself about the good times during those moments when things are less pleasant, keep a record of any positive interactions you have with your parents. You might even want to write a note to them during these times, to share your good feelings and happy experiences as a part of their lives.

Most importantly, remember to reward yourself for changing outcomes, avoiding old traps, understanding and restructuring your reactions. Refusing to take negative bait, being patient, and remaining flexible and adaptive are difficult challenges. Accomplishing these goals should be viewed as a personal victory. So give yourself a special treat for the effort you put into making these changes – a massage, favorite meal, time alone to read or relax to soothing music, whatever refreshes and renews you. As a caring and compassionate adult child of aging parents, you deserve it. And you’ll be better prepared to provide sensitive, loving support as a result.