

## Empathy: A Key Skill for Family Caregivers

Empathy plays a major role in the overall health of the caregiving relationship, especially during difficult times when everyone is feeling stressed. Empathy can help us feel less frustrated with and judgmental of other people's behaviors and choices. It encourage us to try to understand and be curious as to where the other person might be coming from. Empathy is defined as "*the ability to understand another person's circumstances, point of view, thoughts, and feelings.*" ([www.about.com](http://www.about.com))

Empathy can be expressed in both directions in the relationship between the family caregiver and the care recipient. It also plays a key role in the relationship between various other family members.

When my siblings and I were caregiving my dad who had colon cancer, I discovered that I was a lot less irritated and frustrated with him and the situation when I took the time to put myself in his shoes. I imagined what it must be like for him to be in pain, to be facing with his own death, to be dependent on others in order for the simplest tasks, to have total strangers (home support) or his children providing personal care to him and to no longer have any privacy. I realized that he was embarrassed and scared by his situation and his complete dependence on others. And if I had to experience all that I would probably be grumpy, needy or "uncooperative" sometimes too. This realization shifted my view of the whole situation.

Similarly, although we may be tempted to make decisions for our care-recipient or do what we think is best for them (or often more accurately - what would make our own life easier), it cannot be helpful for many reasons. We need to remember they are adults used to making their own decisions. They may be experiencing feelings of loss and frustration around changes in their health, independence and mobility and this will impact how receptive they are to suggestions from us. The more you try to do for them without checking with them first, the stronger these feelings of loss and frustration will be. Remember you may one day find yourself in a similar situation. Think about how you would like to be treated, regardless of your physical or mental limitations.

Everyone responds to a situation in their own unique way. Frustration can occur if we expect everyone else to feel or act exactly the same as us. Each person in the family comes with a different experience within that family, a different relationship with the person who is ill and a different comfort level with illness and the associated emotions. Expect and accept differences of opinion and reactions and find ways to compromise. Keep in mind that everyone has the right to their own feelings and point of view. You can agree to disagree and still complete the caregiving tasks as needed.

By putting ourselves in the other person's shoes and being curious about their feelings or motivation underlying their behavior or comment, we can change our own emotional response to the situation. We will be less likely to be triggered and react with anger or defensiveness. We can come to recognize that their response is not about us personally, it is their reaction to a challenging situation. Validating someone's experience and feelings can go a long way toward opening up communication and improving a relationship.