

February Senior Sense: Choosing Your Battles As a Caregiver

By Liz O'Donnell

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As my parents aged, I was the daughter who stepped up to have difficult conversations with them. I fancied myself a negotiations pro after years working in the communications industry. And while many of those discussions went well, I often struck out when making the smaller requests. My mother agreed to my hiring a home health aide to help her out, but she would never leave details in her phone messages no matter how many times I pleaded with her about it. Those “call me when you have a minute,” messages sent this busy, working mother over the edge. How could I prioritize the return call if I didn't know if what she wanted to discuss was an emergency or merely neighborhood gossip? And while my father agreed to stop shoveling snow, he refused to wait for the home health aide to make the bed, even after he tripped over his bedsheets and injured his knee.

Oh, I spent so much energy arguing with parents about the small things! If only I had learned to pick my battles, I would have been a much less stressed out daughter. So how can you avoid the mistakes I made? What's the secret to not sweating the small caregiving-related stuff? Read on for the lessons hindsight taught me.

Eldercare is not role reversal. As we start to worry about, and take on caregiving responsibilities for, our parents, we often think we are reversing roles with them. Since our frame of reference is that of child to adult, we think the next phase of life, as they become more dependent on us, is the same. But there is a big difference between a parent raising a child and an adult child caring for a parent - autonomy. No, we are not “parenting” our parents as caregivers; we are supporting them as they age. The role reversal paradigm infantilizes adults, dismisses their life experiences, and ultimately leads to frustration for all involved.

When I reflect on the battles I lost as an adult daughter, they were the battles that weren't critical. My parents listened to me when it came to matters of life or death - medication management, safe driving, etc. – but they didn't let me boss them around when it came to the more trivial things. Nor should they have because...

It's their life; not yours. Assuming our parents are not experiencing any cognitive decline, we need to remember that as caregivers, we are assisting them in their lives – we are not taking over their lives. That means, if, like my father who wanted his bed made first thing every morning, your parent wants something done their way, they get to have it their way - - assuming, of course, they are not putting anyone in harm's way. Does that mean we need to enable or accommodate our parent's every request or decision? No. It means they get to choose how to live their lives and we get to choose how to respond. I had no right demanding my father stop making his bed. I had every right to choose how I responded if he tripped over the bed linens and was hurt again.

Compassion goes a long way. Eldercare is challenging; so is aging. So often we react to care-related situations through our own point of view. How can we not? We are juggling our own busy lives, while watching our parents decline, and we typically have too few support systems in place to aid us. It's natural to wish our parents would just listen to us and trust we know best. Wouldn't that make caregiving more efficient and less fraught with emotion? Unfortunately, family relationships don't operate on a schedule and feelings are part of the package. When making requests of your aging parents, do try to understand their point of view. Are they grieving loss of independence? Are they scared, tired, or frustrated? If you invest in the time up front to understand how they are feeling, you will likely save time on frustration, miscommunication and resentment. A little compassion can go a long way.

Liz O'Donnell is the founder of [Working Daughter](#) and the author of [Working Daughter: A Guide To Caring For your Aging Parents While Making A Living](#). For caregiving support, information and resources contact a Senior Care Advisor at Care.com. We are master's-level social workers specializing in adult and senior care. Call us today at (855) 781-1303 x3 or email questions to careplanning@care.com

