

Getting Past the Power Struggle

For Caregivers who are concerned about those they care for, this is for you.

Why?

...because at some time, it is likely you have felt or will have felt:
ANNOYED, ANGRY, PROVOKED, CHALLENGED, FRUSTRATED, HURT
or feel like crying in despair, ***“I GIVE UP!”***¹

These emotions are felt when Caregivers encounter individuals who set the stage for power struggles. If you have never experienced a power struggle, you have probably never been in a close relationship. Power struggles occur in every type of relationship – co-workers, spouses, family members, and sometimes even strangers.

Power struggles can happen when there is a perception between two or more individuals that there apparently is “scarce supply” of something important. It may be something tangible such as money, time, or personal space. Often the scarce resource is something more intangible, such as being right, having things done a certain way, or looking bad in front of others.

Whatever the source, power struggles create distance and hostility instead of closeness and trust. Caregiver relationships are high risk to develop power struggles when those they care for have significant emotional, mental health, and/or physical needs. The push-pull of the power struggle results in resentment, resistance, rebellion, or sullen compliance, sometimes for both parties.

Relationships free of power struggles create feelings of safety, closeness, and trust where a Caregiver has a positive influence without fear of blame, shame or pain.

How to Sidestep or Resolve Power Struggles

1. Caregiver attitude has an impact

How to present yourself to best advantage:

- Mask and control any personal feelings of tension
- Practice being a neutral presence with an even, pleasant facial expression
- Give eye contact matched to the person and situation
- Use non threatening posture- keep hands at sides or down in front, legs slightly apart and relaxed, overall relaxation throughout stance

¹ The Four Mistaken Goals of the Dependent Elderly by Larry Nisan M.Ed. and Evelyn Wolff M.D. *The Psychotherapy Institute. Toronto, Canada*



Seniors and People with Disabilities
Behavior Consultant Toolkit

Oregon Technical Assistance Corporation, 2011

www.otac.org



Seniors and People with Disabilities
Behavior Consultant Toolkit
Oregon Technical Assistance Corporation, 2011
www.otac.org

2. Resolve conflict with a win for both parties

- Look for the individual's viewpoint, appreciate it, understand their perspective
- Open your eyes and mind to the bigger picture
- Appreciate differences as normal, legitimate, non-threatening, and negotiable.

3. Make time

- All interactions will be more satisfying and productive if you can carve out time to spend with the individual.
- Of course, you don't have time to spend hours every day, but if you regularly make time for a cup of tea or a short visit you'll be more likely to have the conversations that reveal underlying concerns and help issues emerge.

4. Listen, listen, listen

- Make sure to take the time to really listen. If they bring up something that seems unrelated to the matter at hand, it's always tempting to interrupt and steer them back on track. But if you pay attention, you may find that a seemingly irrelevant point indicates a concern you weren't aware of.
- Listen as they reminisce, and pay careful attention to the story behind the story.

5. Practice empathy

- Imagine what they're feeling when they behave badly.
- Understand their distress and fear.

6. Be patient at all times.

- When their opinion of you swings from good to bad, let them carry on until the episode is over.
- Recognize their impulsive behavior is beyond their control and let it run its course.

7. Create a stable environment.

- Follow routines and take care to prepare them for changes when possible.

Resources

Matthiessen, Connie, Caring.com <http://www.caring.com/articles/elderly-communication>

Nelsen, Jane, "Eighteen Ways to Avoid Power Struggles", Positive Discipline, 2009

Nisan, Larry M.Ed. and Evelyn Wolff M.D. "The Four Mistaken Goals of the Dependent Elderly" The Psychotherapy Institute. Toronto, Canada



Seniors and People with Disabilities
Behavior Consultant Toolkit

Oregon Technical Assistance Corporation, 2011

www.otac.org