

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Taking Care of a Crabby or Formerly Abusive Parent

It's hard to be patient when you're taking care of a parent who's crabby, and it can be extremely difficult to care for a parent who physically, emotionally, or sexually abused you when you were younger.

Let's look at the crabby parent first. It could be that Dad has always been grumpy. When you reached adulthood, you had a real sense of relief because you could move out and be on your own. But now he needs your help. He doesn't necessarily want it and may, in fact, resent it, but he needs it. Each time you approach his front door you feel as if you're entering the lion's den. You hope you'll be lucky enough to come out unscathed.

Sometimes a parent who has been pleasant for most of his or her life suddenly turns grumpy. That isn't surprising, and, most likely, it's temporary. Mom's change in disposition may be triggered by the other things happening to her. It's easy to snap at the people around you, even those you love the most, when you don't feel well.

But if that change in personality continues to stretch on, you need to talk it over with your parent's doctor. It could be related to a medical, a mental, or an emotional problem that can be addressed. It could be the side effect of a new medication, one that leaves your mother feeling anxious. Or it could be that a prescription Mom has been taking for a long time is causing this new and different reaction

because her body chemistry is changing.

Whether your parent has been a lifelong crab or is only being nasty temporarily, it's important for you to remember that this is a situation that presents a high risk of abuse. It's possible for an adult child to lose control and harm a parent. Obviously, that's

never right. Neither is an aging parent hitting an adult child. Sometimes it may be necessary for you to make sure you are at least an arm's length away from Mom or Dad. You have to keep yourself safe. If this situation arises, contact your parent's doctor and get professional help as soon as possible.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with a difficult parent:

--Always respect your parent. Even when the going is rough, keep in mind the Principles of Catholic Caregiving. Mom should be respected. She should always be given compassionate care.

--Talk about it. During a calm period, sit down with Dad and

tell him what he's doing that bothers you. Be specific. It could be that your father isn't even aware that something is upsetting you.

--If the situation becomes volatile, get away completely. Get out of the house, calm down, and try to analyze the situation more objectively. If Mom is pushing your buttons—and nobody can push our buttons like family—try to control your reaction. Change the subject. Move on.

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Principles of Catholic Caregiving

Love and respect: Whether you're caring for an aging parent or other older family member, a spouse, a child with special needs or a friend, the bond between you and your loved one is like no other. You probably realize that this relationship — though seldom ideal and never perfect — remains a tremendously important part of your life.

You're now being given the opportunity — the challenge — to "honor" your mother and father, to love your spouse, to care for your child or friend in a new, different and more demanding way.

Caregiving is pro-life: The "culture of life" includes providing care for a loved one who is sick, elderly, disabled or frail. A cornerstone of respect for human life is compassionate care for the most vulnerable among us at all the stages of life, from the moment of conception until natural death.

The spirituality of caregiving: Caring for a loved one is a vocation, a calling from God. It's a mission and a role a caregiver accepts in the name of love and it is Love itself who accompanies both the caregiver and the care-receiver on this journey.

An awareness of the presence of God, fostered by a turning to both formal and informal prayer, helps you offer loving and compassionate care.

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--*Consider stepping aside.* If Dad fights you every step of the way, maybe you can't be his primary caregiver. Look into getting someone else to do the cleaning, the laundry, the personal care, and so on. Research your resources.

--*Get support.* Talk with others who understand what you're going through. A support group can be a wonderful release. A long lunch with a good friend can do wonders. You need to remember to take care of yourself, not just for your own sake but for the sake of your parent.

--*Pray.* Of course, the best support for you, one that's always available, is God. He's there, always ready to comfort you, to guide you, and to love you completely. Turn it all over to God. Prayer can go a long way in helping you through this challenge.

If your parent abused you when you were younger, a caregiving role is probably extremely difficult, if not impossible. Perhaps you simply can't be the one to take care of Dad. There's no reason to get down on yourself if you're not able to help him. There's no reason to offer an explanation to others who ask why, except to say, "I'm not able to do that." You do not have to be the frontline caregiver.

You can be the one who arranges for your parent to get help from other people

If you do assume a caregiving role, get the support you need. Counseling can help. Ignoring memories and feelings—and the many physical, mental, and emotional complications they can trigger and aggravate—doesn't make them go away.

It may be clear now that you're never going to be able to resolve this situation with your parent, but you may be able to come to terms with it yourself. That may mean you have, at best, a neutral attitude toward Dad. You love him as you would a stranger. You're civil to him, but there is no parent-child relationship or bond there. Your situation is a part of the unfairness that can damage an innocent person's life.

The ideal is to find forgiveness for those who have hurt us. However, some things seem to be unforgivable. Some damage has no quick fix. This is a time for prayer, an opportunity to receive the spiritual support of your Catholic faith: the sacraments, your parish community, daily Mass, and your parish priest, for example. All are readily available.

For more information, visit www.YourAgingParent.com,
a program of the Friends of St. John the Caregiver.