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Coping with elderly parent's worsening behavior

A colleague posted a link to an article that speaks to a common issue presented by many families who are caring for older loved ones. The article is titled "Caring through the hurt: Experts tell how to cope when elderly parents' behavior worsens." (<https://www.dallasnews.com/life/aging-1/2017/11/09/caring-hurt-experts-advise-cope-elderly-parents-behavior-changes-worse>). The article gives examples and quotes from experts who deal with families experiencing difficulty in caring for relatives, especially parents. A Dallas psychologist, Paul Chafetz, states that "Not every older adult is delightful, and being the child of a difficult parent can be lonely, heartbreaking, exhausting and demoralizing." Dr. Chafetz leads a support group for those facing this struggle, and last year wrote a book *Loving Hard-to-Love Parents: A Handbook for Adult Children of Difficult Older Parents*.

Dr. Chafetz points out that people with Alzheimer's and other dementias do not merely experience memory loss. A normally calm mother may become agitated; an unfailing kind father may become aggressive or belligerent. Dr. Diana Kerwin, chief of geriatrics at Texas Health Dallas and founder of Texas Alzheimer's and Memory Disorders points out that dementia affects brain tissue which can then cause personality changes. The older person can be restless, wander or even have delusions. Sometimes memory loss results in paranoia; for instance, Mom cannot remember where she put her purse so she accuses family members of stealing it. Such behavior is very hurtful to those who are trying to help. The emotional burden can be even heavier for those whose parents suffer from mental illness exacerbated by aging as the child has likely had to cope with difficult behaviors all of her life.

Maintaining necessary distance to protect the heart is the key to making such relationships work. Dr. Chafetz says to remember that loving an elderly parent does not mean that you must take responsibility for that person's happiness. He states, "We don't have to like them, and we don't have to make them happy. Think needs over wants. That's what love is." Dr. Kerwin advises to respect the older person's autonomy as much as possible. Try to ignore annoying but harmless behavior but intervene if it threatens health and safety.

Dr. Chafetz' book gives some sample coping skills for working with a problem parent (these would work for any caregiver of an older person as well). One is to adopt healthy self-care habits because if the caregiver burns out, the parent is likely to act out. It is necessary to enforce boundaries; decide how much of your time you will allow the parent to occupy in your life. Avoid pointless confrontations, as reasoning with an irrational person is unproductive. Employ the "therapeutic fib" to encourage the parent to accept necessary care. Become a "smarter fish" who does not get "hooked" into repeated patterns. Seek out and accept support, and tackle your own difficult behaviors. Think about your own future caregivers and don't repeat the patterns. Dr. Chafetz' book also has a list of empathetic and vague responses that help with coping skills for the caregiver.

Caring through the hurt is not easy but it can be done if done smarter. Not all elderly parents or other relatives are difficult but many require that we look at the picture from a different angle.