



## Can a Caregiver Be an Effective Advocate Without Appearing Adversarial?

**Dear Carol:** I'm confused about how much oversight I should provide for my dad who has moved into memory care. He's in mid-stage dementia. I visit most days so that I can keep him company as well as make sure he's well cared for. So far, even though the staff are pressed for time, they're generally amazing. Still, there are times when I think that I should speak up for him, so I do. How can I advocate for Dad's best interest without appearing unreasonable or worse, adversarial? – MS

**Dear MS:** Attitude says a lot. I've known people who make it plain to the staff from the start that they aren't trusted to do the right thing. In my mind, that starts the relationship with the facility off on the wrong foot.

Neglect and/or abuse do happen, and when it does, it needs to be aggressively investigated. That said, in my own community most of the facilities are doing a good job, especially considering nationwide staffing shortages.

***So, how can we be effective advocates without becoming unreasonable or adversarial?***

- Begin with the attitude that you want to become friends with the staff. This includes everyone from the administrators to the maintenance people. If your attitude is respectful, these generally overworked human beings will be more inclined to go that extra mile for your older adult or spouse.
- Since you can visit most days, you could take on the role of supplying small comforts. I kept a "go bag" packed that I brought with me each day. It contained replenishment for random products that my elders enjoyed, food treats, change of season clothing, entertainment – whatever could improve their day.
- Speak up when something seems off. If you refrain from complaining loudly about every delay or perceived shortcoming, the staff will be more ready to listen when you mention that your dad isn't getting toileted often enough or that he's not getting the kind of food that he enjoys.
- If you feel that your dad is over- or under-medicated, you should be referred to the correct person so that you can discuss your concerns.



- Insist on care planning meetings so you know what to expect. This is a time to hash out any issues that bother you.
- For serious issues, speak up clearly and let them know that you need to see improvement. If you are brushed off or ignored by the floor staff, talk with the administrator. If you still see no action, contact the ombudsman for the area. You can find this person by going to the Eldercare Locator ([eldercare.acl.gov](http://eldercare.acl.gov)). Ombudsmen are in place to represent long-term-care residents.

In short, begin with a positive attitude for your dad's sake as well as the staff's. Treat the staff with respect and be available to help with the often-difficult transition from home. Speak up when needed but if all else fails, contact an ombudsman. The fact that you even asked this question speaks well of you. Best wishes to you