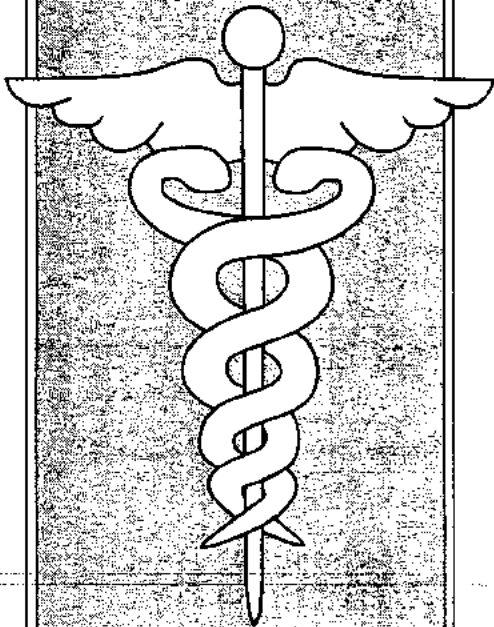


**Long Term Care  
Network,  
A Division of  
PRIMEDIA Healthcare**

# **Communicating with Residents' Families: Conflict Resolution**

**EDA 311-0151**



*presenter:*

**Paula Gillman, MSN, RN, CS, GNP**  
*Baylor Senior Health Center  
Dallas, Texas*

**LTCN**<sup>TM</sup>  
Long Term Care Network

© MCMXCIX, PRIMEDIA Healthcare  
PLEASE NOTE: Permission granted for duplication by  
Long Term Care Network subscribers only.

# COMMUNICATING WITH RESIDENTS' FAMILIES: CONFLICT RESOLUTION

---

## LONG TERM CARE PLACEMENT

Placement of a loved one in a long-term care facility can be a stressful experience. Often there is resistance from an elder and potentially conflicting views among various family members. This stress can lead to conflicts with the staff if families perceive problems with resident care, facilities, or attitudes of the caregivers. Several strategies are discussed that can help prevent conflict and handle conflict effectively to achieve "win-win" situations.

The best conflict is none at all. Taking time to get to know family members and understanding their expectations can be helpful. The primary concern of most families is that their loved one be treated with respect.

Several techniques can be used to convey respect to residents and families:

- ❖ greet them with a smile. This is a simple, but effective technique.
- ❖ listen carefully when they talk to you and maintain eye contact.
- ❖ monitor your *body language*. Body language refers to the message sent by the way you stand, sit, and present yourself. Talking to someone with your arms folded across your chest sends a strong message of: "I disagree with what you are saying." Even if you disagree, it is important to maintain an attitude of openness. You can convey this attitude by standing with your arms relaxed at your sides.

Ask questions for clarification of facts and to show interest. Ask how you can help people before they have a chance to ask you. Remember the importance of first impressions. Your initial encounter with someone often determines the success or failure of your future contact with them.

**Practice the Golden Rule:** Treat others as you want to be treated.

Practicing these techniques helps them to become second-nature to you and ensure that you convey respect to residents and family members. But even in the best of circumstances, conflicts arise. Some conflicts require notification of other personnel, such as a nurse or an administrator. Other less serious problems can often be remedied quickly by following a few simple steps. Table 1 lists specific techniques to deal with a person who is angry and aggressive.

### **UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM**

Understand the problem. Conflicts occur when there is a difference between what someone wants to happen and what actually happens. It is critical to understand all of the facts related to a problem before attempting to solve it. Understanding the facts requires careful listening in a non-defensive manner.

Remember that the anger someone is expressing to you is a reflection of how that person is feeling. Always assume that their anger has nothing to do with you personally. This strategy helps you avoid being on the defensive. Once

you think you understand the problem, repeat it back to the person to confirm your understanding.

**AVOID ARGUMENTS**

Do not argue about who caused the problem. The quickest way to resolve any conflict is to apologize even if you have nothing to do with what happened. Apologizing is not an admission of guilt, but simply a way to convey empathy for the bad experience that someone had. A sincere apology often takes away a person's hostility and allows him or her to discuss the problem in a calm manner. Research studies of malpractice lawsuits have shown that most would not have been filed if someone had apologized and shown empathy for what happened.

**SOLVE THE PROBLEM**

Understanding a problem helps you solve it. This is where you may need to seek help, depending on the situation. One strategy for determining a solution to a problem is to ask a

resident or family for ideas. People usually know what it would take to make them happy. Sometimes their expectations may not be realistic, but other times their solution may be simpler than any idea of yours.

As with anything new, these strategies take practice. Pick one step each week and practice it at every resident or family encounter. The payoff is less conflict on the job and more satisfaction from your work. Recognition for a courteous and helpful attitude makes you feel better about yourself and your work.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Willingham, R. (1992) *Hey, I'm the customer*. Prentice Hall: Paramus, NJ.

Anderson, L.N., & Clarke, J.R. (1996). De-escalating verbal aggression in primary care settings. *Nurse Practitioner*, 21(10).

**TABLE 1**

**VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL DO'S AND DON'TS TO DEAL WITH ANGRY OR AGGRESSIVE PEOPLE**

**Nonverbal**

- ❖ Maintain a calm manner.
- ❖ Do not touch the person.
- ❖ Face the person to speak with him/her.
- ❖ Maintain level, intermittent eye contact (Do not stare).
- ❖ Do not cross your arms.
- ❖ Do not point.
- ❖ Keep your hands visible and still.
- ❖ Try to move the person to a quiet room away from other visitors and residents.
- ❖ If you feel tense, take deep breaths.

**Verbal**

- ❖ Address the person by his or her last name (Mr. Jones).
- ❖ Ask the person how you can help
- ❖ The louder the person yells, the softer you should speak.
- ❖ Avoid arguing.
- ❖ Ask open-ended questions.
- ❖ Do not discuss blame or make excuses.
- ❖ Do not personalize the situation, comments, or tone.