

FAMILY CAREGIVER SUPPORT NETWORK
FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS WHO HELP OR CARE FOR OLDER ADULTS

Each Caregivers journey is unique, but something we all face is being an advocate for our loved ones. Chances are, you are already an advocate and just don't think of what you do as advocacy. According to *Webster's Dictionary* an advocate is ***"a person who pleads another's cause; or someone who speaks or writes in support of something."***

We may not identify our role as an advocate when we first make that call to the doctor's office to arrange a check up or have a simple conversation with a neighbor to ask if they are willing to continue to help with the snow shoveling again this year. Then again, the role of advocate may be much more obvious when we need to address concerns regarding the health or safety of our loved one while they are recuperating at the hospital or nursing home. Sometimes we have to be the eyes, ears or voice of a loved one who cannot or will not express their needs or concerns. If their care is being compromised or their rights as a person or as a resident are being violated we need to make sure our loved ones are seen and heard.

Advocating comes easily to some caregivers but for others it may seem overwhelming to speak up and "make waves, or stir things up." However, if carried out correctly, advocating for a loved one will result in better care for them and peace of mind for you.

Here are 5 basic skills that can help you be the best advocate you can be:

- **Reflect:** First, reflect and recognize the underlying reason why you advocate. Often it is out of love, respect and belief in the dignity for the person you care for. Once the reason or purpose can be recognized and taken to heart, the emotional impact may not be as difficult or burdensome.
- **Discuss the Tough Stuff:** Make sure you know what your loved one would want. To be assertive on behalf of another person requires understanding that person and respecting their wishes. Medical professionals expect families to have had conversations about life, death and all the stuff in-between in order to provide quality ongoing medical treatment and care. There may be times when you as the caregiver do not agree with the choices of your loved one, but honoring their choices shows respect for the person. That in itself is advocacy.
- **Communicate:** When advocating it is important to be assertive in order to get your concern addressed. It is possible- and is actually more likely- for you to get results without being aggressive. What we really want is someone to truly listen to our concerns, take them seriously, and do something about them. A useful communication tool to accomplish this is to try using **"I"** statements rather than **"you"** statements. For example, think about how you would feel if someone said to you "Why does it **always** take **you** so long to respond to my mom after she presses her call light?"

“You” messages unintentionally irritate people because they sound accusatory, blaming, critical or hostile. They can veer a conversation off track because people focus on their irritation or hurt feelings, and not on what you intended to say.

Now, consider if someone said to you, “I am very concerned because my mother tells me she waits a long time after pushing her call light.” Using “I” messages in a firm and matter-of-fact tone allow us to express our feelings such as anger, frustration, disappointment or concern without “blowing up,” blaming others or causing them to become defensive.

“I” messages can be helpful when you need to raise a problem or concern, ask for help, state your intentions (or what is not intended) and to set limits. Although it may take some time and effort to break old habits, good communication techniques like “I” messages can open the door to effect much easier to discuss.

- **Be Informed:** It is important to develop a knowledge base about medical, social service, legal and financial systems. Find out about the services and resources that are available in your area. How might they meet your needs and who should you talk to? Knowing where and who to bring your comments, concerns or praises to is critical to being an effective advocate.
- **Document:** Sometimes the pen really is mightier than the sword. In the medical, social service, legal and financial worlds, **“it doesn’t exist or didn’t happen if it’s not written down.”** Keep a caregiver journal or notebook and write down everything you do on behalf of your loved one. Record all phone calls with the date, place or person you are calling, the name of the person you spoke to, a contact number and some general notes about the conversation you had. Write down any questions you asked as well as the response you received and any concerns that were resolved or decisions that were made.

It is equally important to make sure things are being documented on the professional end as well. If there is a care plan in place make sure that any concern, no matter how small, is reflected in the care plan, even if you talked to someone about it. Ask for copies of any paperwork or documents and keep them in a safe place. Finally, never hand over an original document or your only copy. If you absolutely have to turn over an original, make a copy for yourself first. If it comes down to your word against someone else’s your paper trail backup can provide tangible evidence to your claim.

Last but not least, know that here at the **Family Caregiver Support Network, 414-220-8600**, we are ready to assist and support you in your role as your loved one’s advocate. We understand the types of information you may need, the hats you wear and the emotions that you wade through on any given day. Just as you are an advocate for your loved one, we are an advocate for you as the caregiver. Come to us for information, resources and support. We are here to help you be the best advocate you can be.

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Caregiver Support

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