

Communicating with Difficult Family Members

Adele Knox, a Wife Who Cares

Place: The office of Administrator, Charles Armstrong, CEO of a 123-bed senior facility in a Chicago suburb. This is his third meeting with 74 years old Adele Knox. Her husband, age 88, diagnosed with severe Alzheimer's/dementia is incontinent and occasionally abusive. Mrs. Knox lives alone. For the past six months, she been calling nursing and social work staff daily, complaining about her husband's treatment. The director of nursing assured Charles that the entire nursing staff is working hard to toilet Dr. Knox on time. The staff feels that Mrs. Knox is suffering from mild memory loss. Mrs. Knox visits each day. On two occasions, she found that her husband had not been toileted. Their 47-year-old daughter is divorced, struggling to put her son through college, and not much help.

Charles: "I'm glad you came to see me. Our director of nursing tells me you are not happy with the way we are treating your husband.



Adele: I never said a word to that woman. I would have nothing to do with her. She lies. You know that my husband is a doctor – not an M.D., but a man who can control himself if that aide, Whatsername, would get him to the toilet on time. My daughter is a trained dental assistant, and she would never use those cheap diapers on people. Breathing hard, Adele Knox pounds a swollen, arthritic fist on the desk for emphasis. She continues, eyes narrowed, tone accusing: We certainly pay you enough!

Charles, his voice gentle with compassion:

This is a hard time for you, Mrs. Knox. We all know how much you care about your husband. We're trying to keep him as Independent as possible.

Adele: Well, you're not trying hard enough! This is the fifth time in one week I found him soaking wet and smelly. It's the cheap labor you hire to save money. If you don't do something, I will call the Ombudsman and the FCC. The government will get you out of business.

Charles, his voice calm, controlled:

Mrs. Knox, here is your husband's Care Plan. You know that he has Alzheimer's disease. He is completely incontinent. You can see that we take him to the toilet every two hours.

Adele: You are making up a lot of excuses. They told me this was a good Nursing home. Well, they were wrong. It stinks!

Charles, rising to end the interview, his voice firm, but caring:

I'm sorry you feel that way. I will talk to the nursing director. We'll see what we can do to make you feel better.

Adele, a bit assuaged:

You better do something. I can't take this anymore. I feel dizzy all the time. This place is terrible! She stalks out.

Validation Intervention: Adele Knox, unable to face her own occasional incontinence and increasing memory loss, alone and afraid of losing her independence, is unable to face her husband's reality. She projects her nameless anger and fear onto the nursing home. Facts mean nothing to her. The administrator can never convince her that the staff is working hard to help her husband. Charles, aware of Adele Knox' feelings of helplessness and rage, needs to *use empathy* to build a trusting relationship. He recalls a time when he was

finishing his training, when his wife had a miscarriage, when he was alone in a strange city. Like Adele Knox, he projected his anger and fear of failure onto his faculty advisor, who responded with empathy.

In the next interview, he uses these Validation helping techniques:

Be aware of your own emotions and shelve them during the interview

Center

Calibrate: A careful observation of the physical characteristics of the client

Re-phrase with empathy

Reminisce

Use the client's Preferred Sense

Adele: (bursts into the Administrator's office without knocking.)

Mr. Armstrong! I just saw my husband. He was sitting in the same position as yesterday. That aide never took him to the toilet. You have done nothing to correct the situation. As soon as I get home, I will call the Ombudsman. I can't take it anymore. I feel terrible. I have an awful headache.

Charles: (lays aside his rising anger at Adele Knox' abrupt interruption; focuses on his **Center** – a spot two inches below his waist – inhales deeply through his nose, follows the breath mentally, and washes it out from his Center. He is now open to Adele Knox.)

Charles: (**Observes** Adele Knox' physical characteristics: Eyes narrow, lips tight, breath rapid in short spurts, chin juts forward, fingers pointing, accusing, voice high, harsh) **Re-phrases** – repeats the gist of what Adele Knox has said, picking up her key words and her underlying emotions *with empathy*. He pictures his wife after her miscarriage.)

Charles: Mrs. Knox, you mean your husband was not taken to the toilet after **all** you have done?

Adele: (mollified, her tone softer, less harsh) That's Right! That awful woman did nothing! She leered at me. She makes me feel terrible.

(Adele views her world through her feelings. She uses many kinesthetic words. To build empathy, Charles uses her *preferred Sense*.)¹

Charles: I **sense** that you can't **stand** it anymore. You are at your wits end.

Adele: (her voice lighter, relieved) That's right! You hit the nail on the head! I have had it!

Charles: (**Reminiscing** to help her express her loss)

You helped your husband for so many years. Weren't you his dental assistant?

Adele: (Smiling slightly, looking up in memory) Yes. That's how we met. He was a good-looking man.

Charles: He certainly was. I saw his picture. He still is.

Adele: That's why it hurts so much to see him in this condition.

Charles: Let's call the nursing assistant, Cheryl, and perhaps you can explain to her how important it is to take Dr. Knox to the toilet regularly.

Adele: OK. If you think it will help.

Adele Knox was able to express her feelings to the director of nursing. Together, with the help of the administrator, they designed a successful treatment plan. Although Adele Knox continued to complain as she aged, her anger lessened and she became a loyal volunteer. After each interview with Adele, Charles released his frustration to the Validation team, who understood.