The Resilient Caregiver:
Setting Limits for Healthful Caregiving

“Sure, Mom, I’ll help.” Given the right situation, this or something similar slips out of our mouths before we even think what it might involve. It’s a pledge of commitment, our gesture of love and support at an emotional time. Because of its emotional strength, it can follow us, becoming a standard we try to attain. Guilt builds on it, preventing the fresh, clear vision that allows us to be resilient.

Resilient caregivers recognize the importance of their own lives, family, and work, and that they must act within those limits. This allows them to continue caring with dedication and new ideas as quickly as possible. They seem to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change, bouncing back with fresh resolve and new perspectives.

To ensure that we can really be there, really go the distance for our aging family member, it’s essential to give careful thought to all the elements of our lives, and clearly explain reasonable limitations. It may be those limits that we don’t clarify that hurt people the most. Limits can be about our time, our money, our space, and our strength. Think of those limits as boundaries that everyone can recognize and work with.

What are good boundaries in relationships?
Good boundaries let us maintain an emotional bond of love, concern, and caring without the negative results of desperation, rescuing, enabling, fixing, or controlling. They require us to allow people the freedom to be themselves.

We have to let the people we love and care for accept personal responsibility for their own actions. Boundaries require that we practice tough love when actions lead to failure or trouble. In respecting boundaries, we respect each other. That dignity is a valued gift often hard for an aging person to find.

Why are boundaries so difficult for caregivers?

Love and affection—Caregivers need “enmeshment” of emotions with their care receiver when they commit to give care. But emotional bonds easily become entangled. Caregivers can fear disappointing the care receiver and losing their love. They may be intimidated by reactions of sadness or anger.

Caregiver characteristic—Caregivers are often helper-type people who like to fix problems. They are also often capable of “over-empathizing” out of love. These impulses can lead to taking on too much personal responsibility rather than seeking other solutions.

No standard to follow—Most of us never took Caregiving 101! There are no written rules on how to be a caregiver, or criteria for what is realistic or unrealistic. There are often no role models. So we build our own job descriptions based on assumptions and wishful thinking that drive us to over-expect a reasonable role in caring for a family member.

Too much to do—No one can do it all, yet many think they should. They feel pulled in too many different directions, and feel lack of control over the many demands on their lives. Frustration and burnout are natural results.
Guilt—It is hard to say no to people who are ill or have diminished abilities without feeling guilty. Caregivers are often unwilling to put their own needs first, and they feel overly responsible for the happiness of the care receiver. Caregivers may also fear that others will see them as neglectful.

Being needed—Some people love to be needed and enjoy being indispensible. Suddenly, the role becomes overwhelming. It is hard for some caregivers to admit their own needs and limits, which are just as important as the care receiver’s.

Assert Yourself for Resilience

Set your limits, or How to say no. Evaluate the care receiver’s limitations in respect to other resources available (friends, neighbors, paid help, etc). Consider also the long-range effects if you allow the person to become unnecessarily dependent on you. Maintaining the elder’s independence and involvement is strongly related to their health and happiness. Many child-raising books discuss parents setting limits for the child. In adult situations however, caregivers set limits with themselves, not the aging family member.

Accept your limitations. Although you may sincerely want to provide for the person’s every need, it is unlikely you can do so. Respect the dignity of the elder when you respond to their requests. Agree to provide only those services you can manage gracefully and with good humor. Giving help grudgingly or in the spirit of a martyr will leave both of you angry and frustrated. Stick to your decisions. If you consider a request unreasonable or simply more than you can manage, explain your position and make alternative suggestions. Realize you are not responsible for the elder’s happiness. Some people have trouble accepting the losses that can accompany old age, and their dissatisfaction doesn’t help either of you. Let them know you care, even though you may not always meet all requests.

Detach for Resilience

Detachment is living a life that isn’t centered on someone else’s. It is the ability to live one’s own life without having it controlled by someone else. To be detached is to recognize your loved one’s anger without taking it personally about something you did or didn’t do. You can listen, but not engage much…just enough for them to know they were heard, but little enough to avoid becoming defensive, angry or shamed by this encounter.

Make caregiving a smaller part of your life by making other parts of your life bigger. Focus on personal activities like hobbies, grandchildren, volunteering, knitting, writing, learning new things, friends: the only way to reduce someone’s power over your life is to fill your time with other people, places, and things. Expand your horizons; occupy your mind with new ideas. Learn to recognize the guilt trap that an aging family member can use to keep you in the status quo. The detached, resilient caregiver can continue to be close without giving up independence.

Another method of detachment is to avoid jumping right away to fix a complaint. Instead of spending your energy on offering solutions, try saying “Hmmm. Interesting.” “Wow, that’s too bad.” “Huh, what are you going to do about that?” The last one is very effective, since the person may expect you to fix their problems. Instead, you express interest without offering to fix the problem, and force them to offer solutions. Then you conclude with, “Well, that sounds like a good plan. Good luck with it!” Another stock response includes flattery: “You’re a smart person. I’m confident you can solve this!”
Other Tips to Support Resilience
Give yourself a mental break. The following tips may help you do this. Choose your favorites and build healthy habits in your daily life.

- Discover the why or motivation for your caregiving. Make it your choice and not something you feel your family or an unfair world has imposed on you.
- Stay connected to others, to your community, and to the things that bring you pleasure each day.
- Stay connected to those who have gone before you on the road of caregiving.
- Be open.
- Be playful and flexible.
- Don’t take yourself too seriously.
- Appreciate.
- Laugh often, cry often, and be gentle judging yourself.
- Meditate.
- Celebrate liberally and often.
- Believe in possibilities. It can always be different.
- Don’t spend time asking why.
- Let go of futile efforts. Don’t waste your energy trying to get your elder to change.

Lori and Her Mother
Lori cares for her mother who lives alone in her home in a small town 150 miles away. Her mom has mobility problems that make doing laundry and other household tasks difficult. She has a neighbor who assists with lawn care and snow shoveling, but her mom refuses to get additional assistance for the in-home tasks. Instead, she relies on Lori when she visits once a month, or she struggles to do it herself. Lori has asked her mom to hire a homemaker to assist her once a week and lists many reasons why her mom should take advantage of this. As far as Lori is concerned, her mom can well afford the costs and cannot understand why her mom refuses to hire a helper. Lori has spent hours talking and cajoling her mom to get more help to no avail – her mom is happy to have Lori do it. She prefers to save her assets so she has something to pass along to her kids and grandkids.

This is a perfect example of how limits can assist Lori with adjusting to her mom’s decision. Lori may decide to tell her mom that she understands that her mom doesn’t want to hire a homemaker and then explain that she is willing or not willing to continue to assist with these tasks. Then, Lori needs to change her mindset to accommodate that her mother’s choice may not seem the best to Lori, but her mom does get the choice to decide this issue. Lori can let her mom know that she is disappointed, but that she appreciates her mom’s fierce sense of independence. If in the future, her mom changes her mind, Lori knows of options in her community and can assist with hiring someone. Then Lori may decide to not address this issue again until her mom brings it up, choosing to free her own energy to do more productive, perhaps enjoyable things with her mom.
Mark and His Wife
Mark has provided loving care for his wife for several years following her stroke. She has physical limitations such that Mark doesn’t feel comfortable leaving her alone. He’s made arrangements to have a companion when he leaves the house. His wife complains bitterly each time and insists that she is fine on her own. It has gotten to the point where Mark avoids leaving the house to avoid an argument. Mark knows that his wife needs assistance and he is doing what is right by taking time away for himself and arranging for his wife’s safety while he is out.

Detachment is a good method for Mark to explore. His wife knows that she can engage him by complaining and is sometimes successful in keeping him home. Mark could start to disengage from having these conversations when he needs to leave. He can start by using a matter of fact tone that he is going out tomorrow and has arranged a companion to be with her during that time. He tells her that he knows she doesn’t agree with him, but he feels it is necessary. He doesn’t engage in a lengthy conversation about it, but could say: “I know that you don’t agree and that we will not change each other’s minds. But I am doing the best I can.” Then he walks away. He may have some feelings of guilt and sadness because of this and may need to consult with others to help him stay strong.

Mary and Her Aunt
Mary assists her aunt who is a recent widow. Her aunt and uncle never had kids and were very devoted to one another. Her uncle loved to provide for his wife and she loved to be “babied” by him. Now, her aunt is very depressed and lonely and asks Mary and her siblings to spend time with her so that she is rarely alone in her home. Mary and her siblings are willing to help once or twice a week, but do not have the resources to see her more often. They feel guilty and struggle with saying No to their aunt because she obviously is having a hard time. Mary practiced assertiveness and detachment to allow her to not be consumed by guilt. She identified who of the family can come over how often and then sat down with her aunt to discuss. She then offered to find other people to come over if her aunt wanted to try that option. She asked her aunt to understand their dilemma and that they are committed to assisting her, but that others may have to join the team. Mary recognized that she is not responsible for either her aunt’s depression or recovery. She tried to identify what she could do for her without feeling burnt out and resentful. And she reassured her aunt that she cares for her and values her time with her.

Parting Thoughts
Only you can determine what you can and cannot handle, and where and when to draw that line. No one else can define for a caregiver when too much is too much. Even the caregiver can’t always foresee the line before it has been crossed. It is important to empower oneself to recognize the fact when it becomes clear, and then to express it honestly, clearly and respectfully. It may seem cruel and selfish to place limitations on what you will and will not do for your loved ones, but caregiving is emotionally, physically, spiritually, socially, financially, and psychologically draining. By setting limits you are not saying “I don’t love you.” Quite the contrary. You are saying “I love you.”

For more cases where boundaries may be at stake and suggestions to help resolve the conflict are provided, see: The 50-50 Rule™: Helping Siblings Overcome Family Conflict While Caring for Aging Parents. Home Instead Inc. http://www.caregiverstress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/The-50-50-Rule-Helping-Siblings-Overcome-Conflict.pdf