

## Take a Fresh Look

In early spring things look different. The trees are still bare but we see the buds lining the branches. The lawn is still a muddy tangle but we notice the first green blades of grass. It's not so much the scene that has changed as our way of looking at it.

When you find yourself frustrated by the demands of a loved one who constantly complains, criticizes or meddles, try viewing the situation from a similarly fresh perspective. There is a good change you will find, not a person deliberately seeking to make your life miserable, but someone who is simply trying to maintain his or her place in the world. Understanding this can help you relate to them more compassionately.

Consider what causes a person needing care to complain or criticize. In many cases it is a response to the loss of activities and personal contacts that you take for granted – things as basic as a casual conversation at the check-out counter. As these elements of life disappear, the person needing care may compensate by, for example, constantly dwelling on minor complaints or developing a preoccupation with his or her health.

This doesn't necessarily mean that they are self-centered. Rather, these concerns that may seem trivial to you become a substitute for real events in the care recipient's life. Knowing this, don't throw up your hands in exasperation every time your loved one starts in on their aches and pains. Instead, view it as your cue to reaffirm your concern for them and their well-being.

Try not to take it personally when your care recipient resists or criticizes your efforts. It is hard for formerly strong and independent individuals to experience increasing loss of independence. They often respond by opposing even small changes and by trying to exercise control in what is now their limited sphere.

One woman helped her son raise three children but moved into an apartment following his remarriage. Shortly thereafter she began to criticize her granddaughter's efforts at cooking. Of course there was nothing wrong with these efforts – she was simply trying to reassure herself that she still had a role to play. Her granddaughter relaxed when she realized that the criticisms were not personal and the fault-finding stopped when the grandmother saw that her contributions were still being valued.

The best response in this case was reassurance rather than harsh words. That's easier to do if you can look beneath the surface of your care recipient's frustration behaviour. Care recipients want what everyone else wants – personal contact, responsibilities, a sense that they are participating in the world and that they have something to contribute. You, as a caregiver, react negatively when you find yourself with too many of these; care recipients react negatively when they have too few. Knowing that – and in honor of the new season – may each of you experience understanding and compassion.