

The 5 Messages Every Caregiver Needs to Know (and steps to respond appropriately)

There are icons in every industry. In music, Mick Jagger, The Beatles, Michael Jackson and Madonna come to mind (I'm dating myself). In business, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Lee Iacocca, Donald Trump. In aging, we have them too – Bernice Neugarten, Robert Butler, Gail Sheehy, Barry Reisberg, Cameron Camp (I once told him he was the Mick Jagger of my world), and my inspiration of today, Teepa Snow. I was lucky enough to meet her and learn from her (thanks to Arden Courts). Teepa is my Madonna – brave enough to point out the obvious *and* challenge us to reconsider our viewpoints, with as much theatrics (and occasional irreverence, which I love). We thank her for granting permission to share this information with our caregivers.

Teepa defined 5 “I’m Sorry” messages. Here, I thought we should break it down further to identify 5 messages that we caregivers sometimes miss (we see “behaviors”), and then some ideas on how to respond – Teepa-style.

- *Your question is making me feel stupid.*
- *I’m not a child – you have no right to treat me like a child.*
- *I am so afraid I’m going crazy; and I’m afraid I’ll be alone because of it.*
- *I was a competent person. This condition should not define me.*
- *I’m distraught because I cannot do/say the things I want/used to.*

Typically, when caregivers hear these messages (usually couched in resistance, anxiety and anger) we respond with reasoning, logic and/or denying the person’s perspective has merit. Seeing it here in black and white, any reasonable caregiver can guess that won’t work to resolve the problem.

Step 1: (Straight from Teepa Snow) Put YOUR agenda aside (that means now is NOT the time to discuss driving). Listen to the person – and use active listening skills to show you are listening (use some of their words).

Step 2: Apologize for making them feel that way.

Step 3: Acknowledge they have a right to their feelings – indicate how you would feel in their shoes or respond with matching emotions (validate their feelings so they don’t have to escalate to get you to really see what they mean).

Step 4: Demonstrate your empathy by indicating you don’t think it’s right/fair or that you wouldn’t want it this way for them.

Step 5: Offer a hand, open arms – do not force contact. The person may just need time to calm down.

A very important point that Teepa made, and I've never heard this suggested in a training before, once the individual calms down, check in and offer a drink/snack with sugar (unless they have dietary restrictions) – being distressed uses lots of energy and they may have a blood sugar drop, taking longer to feel “better.”

The most important thing is to LEARN from the experience. What did you do or say, or how you said it, to make the individual send you that message? Reflect on what you did to push your agenda and see if you can reframe YOUR approach to avoid making the person feel the way s/he did. WE can change our behavior, the person for whom we're caring has losses and grief – is it fair to ask them to adapt to us too?

Teepa has many videos and training programs for working with people with memory disorders, and she has generously given us permission to share this information. You can learn more about her at www.teepasnow.com. For more information on how to decipher messages for people with or without memory loss, [contact us](#) to set up your consultation.