

# Dogs Bark

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“It’s like he doesn’t even know me! He all but accused me of stealing Mom’s money. How can he even think that of me? All I do is try to help Mom.”

Louise had yet another run-in with her brother over their mother’s care. She and her brother both lived in town and worked full time, but Louise handled most of the logistics for their mother’s care. She had arranged with her boss to flex her schedule to take her mom to doctor’s appointments, ran errands for her mom, and even handled her small household repairs. In Louise’s view, she helped her mom, while her brother mostly micromanaged and complained about Louise’s efforts, without actually doing any practical work to speak of. As we talked further, it became clear that this dynamic was longstanding. Her brother felt entitled to tell Louise what she should do, and then he would criticize her efforts. When she confronted him about this over the years, he would turn it around and accuse her of not caring about their mother as much as he did. I asked Louise why she was surprised that her brother treated her this way. She looked at me blankly for a long minute and seemed a little confused. “But I DO love my Mom. I’m doing everything I can figure out to do right by her!” I knew that Louise spent a lot of time helping her mother, and I knew that she thought a lot about how to best take care of her. But that wasn’t my question. I added to my question. “If your brother has always treated you this way, why are you surprised that he treats you this way now?” Seeing she was still a bit confused, I switched the conversation to her dog, Lucy. I asked what noise Lucy made. (Louise said she barked, of course!) I asked if Lucy always barked when she made noise. (Again, yes!) I suggested that her expectations of her brother were as unrealistic as if she was expecting Lucy to meow, or quack, or moo. Lucy would never make those noises. Dogs bark.

The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. If Lucy had always barked, she would likely always bark. If her brother had always treated her this way, he would likely continue. Hoping, expecting, praying he would be different was exhausting, and it inevitably set her up for disappointment. I suggested instead that Louise make some predictions before interacting with her brother. How many suggestions would he make? How many different reasons would he have for not helping their mother himself? What would be the most cutting thing he would say?

Louise tried this and came to our next session looking physically lighter and more energized. She admitted that it still hadn’t been fun talking to her brother, but she found that she didn’t take his comments as personally. She was surprised that she had underestimated how many suggestions he would make, but over estimated how many excuses he would use. She planned to predict his behavior more accurately next time. As we talked it became clear that this exercise gave her a stronger sense of agency in their interactions. She wasn’t just a target for him. Being able to predict how he would act helped her feel less helpless and gave her a stronger sense of herself as a rational, caring woman, despite the things her brother said. So, where in your life do you have a hard time remembering that dogs bark?