

BLENDING FAMILIES

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Throughout our lives, all of us exchange help and support within the context of a family unit.

Our family provides the resources we need to help us grow into independent and capable adults. The nature of this support varies at times; the exchange can be emotional, financial or physical, depending on the circumstances. As we age and our need for assistance grows, the family becomes an increasingly important source of support.

With an increase in lifespan due to health, lifestyle, and technological advances in our society, there are now more generations alive at the same point in time. Families now are having fewer children, forcing a change in the current system we have in place of caring for

older adults. To make the situation more complex, 50 percent of marriages now end in divorce and many people are marrying multiple times in their lifetime. The end result is a complicated situation that involves step-children, step-parents, half-siblings, and new spouses.

These blended families quite often lack the history of enjoying memorable times together or handling previous adversities, causing distrust in family members outside their "circle." There may be a struggle for decision-making power at a time when support is necessary to provide the essential care. Criticism and conflict can evolve over matters such as whose right it is to decide the doctors their loved one should see or what medications they should take. During extremely emotional caregiving experiences, these blended families may struggle greatly to pull together, only compounding the challenges of caregiving.

When care giving does not go well, relationships among blended family members are often strained for many years to come. The key to coping with caregiving while working alongside blended family members is to focus on the individual who needs the care. Suggestions include:

Leave the past in the past: Divorce can be painful for all involved, but old injuries and arguments need to be set aside to be helpful to the person who is ill. Reach out to all interested family members and involve them in devising an effective caregiving plan for the present and future, without rehashing the past of it all.

Practice future hindsight: Many individuals are reticent about reaching out to people who remind them of old family problems. Instead, think of yourself in five years, looking back on this time. Would you prefer to recall yourself

begrudging support and perpetuating negative patterns of family relations? Or would you like to recall the period of caregiving a turning point in the life of your blended family, when all involved refrained from ill will in order to work together and befriend each other?

Honor your mutual love: Even when blended family members have different pasts, interests, and personalities, they share a common concern for the ill loved one (and sometimes the primary caregiver as well). Agreeing to work together against a common issue is a way of honoring mutual love, and makes the need to do so again in the future much easier.

Beware of regression under stress: Severe stress typically does not bring out the best in people; it brings out the worst. Bad behavior should be forgiven as a reaction to a painful situation. When the going gets tough during the caregiving, family may be prone to reverting back to old habits when dealing with family members. Forgiving harsh words, and subsequently refocusing on the caregiver mission, is the most effective way of restoring a trustful working relationship.

It is important to remember that there is strength in blended families. The combination of unique people with differing

ideas and traditions can lead to a stronger, more creative whole.

However, turning to a professional geriatric care manager can be helpful in assisting to overcome difficult family dynamics by mediating conflict and enhancing communication.

Geriatric care managers will assess the needs of a loved one, develop a comprehensive care plan and provide feedback to the family system. Care giving requires family resiliency, and at times, professional guidance in order to help meet the challenge of dealing with a loved one's decline. When individuals in a blended family learn to join their strengths, they can be highly capable and effective caregivers

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