

Siblings: Tips for Sharing in the Care

By
Judith S. Parnes
LCSW, CMC
Executive
Director



Eldercare planning, complex medical decisions and end-of-life debates often hit families after decades of negotiating nothing more serious than where to spend the holidays or if a family vacation or reunion should be planned for the upcoming summer. Even with a successful career and grown kids, adult children who are faced with assisting an elderly parent can be ambushed by all of the old emotional baggage they carry with them from their childhood: sibling rivalry, entrenched roles and resentments, the way a family talked or didn't talk about important things.

Despite mutual concern for a parent's well-being, adult children often have lived apart for decades and have

little experience working together. Visits, end-of-life decisions and estate planning all become sources of sibling strife when old rivalries begin to resurface.

Every sibling no matter their age will remain “the baby”, the “middle child” or the “big brother or sister” in the eyes of their family. And every adult child will feel, sometimes correctly and sometimes not, that mom or dad has a “favorite.” So when it comes to siblings and eldercare, life is complicated. And like it or not within a family, every member has a role or has multiple roles. In your family, who becomes the leader, the decision maker (social, financial, medical), the mobilizer, the joker, the peacemaker, or the provoker?

When your family got together for the holidays, did siblings support one another and their parents or did the holidays bring advice but no action, veiled criticism, or judgmental attitudes? A recent two-year study of married women caring for

parents with dementia found that siblings were not only the greatest source of help to these caregivers but also the biggest source of interpersonal stress. Too often, anger on one side leads to guilt and defensiveness on the other, resulting in sibling gridlock.

Typically families who distribute their elder caregiving duties equally are the exception, not the rule. Even with the most helpful and considerate of families, one person usually assumes the role of primary caregiver. To help families distribute the responsibility of care:

- 1) Ask for specific help early on and regularly so everyone can contribute to their parent's care as much as possible. If a sibling lives out of state, consider sharing the responsibilities including financial management
- 2) If a parent needs help in this area, a local adult child might be in charge of researching

and visiting alternative living arrangements like assisted living or help to arrange for the parent's downsizing to a smaller home or apartment. Another sibling could work with your elderly parents to make sure all their legal documents, like a regular and living wills, and a designated health care proxy are in order.

- 3) The availability of technology has been a godsend for families trying to work together. All family members should use group emails, conference calling, and skype regular family meetings so that everyone is aware of the same information, at the same time. Keeping everyone involved in the process will prevent some very negative blaming, suspicion, and

perceived back stabbing which can occur in every family under stressful situations.

- 4) Ask that each family member do their part to provide for caregiver respite, or help pay for respite care, if your elderly parent cannot, to avoid primary caregiver burnout and exhaustion. Even if a sibling lives out of town, arrangements can be made to use vacation or family-leave time for respite care. Or, siblings could provide prepared meals or a house cleaning service on a regular basis to lessen the primary caregiver's daily household duties.
- 5) A professional geriatric care can help coordinate all care needs. They can provide information about available community resources

including Medicaid and develop a comprehensive assessment of an older adult's needs. If necessary, a geriatric care manager can mediate serious family disagreements to act as a neutral party, and hopefully, ward off estrangements.

A care manager is a professional trained in assisting elderly individuals, families, and others in the community with elder care management and planning with an emphasis of preventing crisis situations from occurring and preserving dignity throughout life by assuring the highest level of physical and emotional independence possible for each client. Often a one-time comprehensive consultation is all that is necessary to develop an all-inclusive plan of action that will give the family the professional direction necessary.

Judith S. Parnes, L.C.S.W., C.M.C., is a nationally recognized gerontologist and is Executive Director of Elder Life Management, Inc., Ocean, NJ. ELM provides quality elder care planning and management services to older adults and their families and can be reached at www.elderlifemanagement.org or by calling (732) 493-8080 for more information

