

# Talking with Your Siblings About Your Older Relative's Needs and Care

## Overview

Positive ways to communicate with siblings about an older relative's needs and care.

- Issues siblings may face
- Starting the conversation
- Talking about ways to share responsibility
- Talking about finances
- Communicating over a distance
- When you disagree about a relative's condition or care

Brothers and sisters can be a welcome source of support during stressful times. This is especially true as relatives age. Siblings share a connection to loved ones and a feeling that "we're all in this together." Talking with your siblings can provide perspective, relief, and solutions. It can also be a challenge. Siblings may disagree about such emotional matters as a parent's well-being, health, or need for care. Brothers and sisters may revert to childhood roles and old tensions may resurface. When siblings live far apart, communication can be even more challenging.

When discussing the care and needs of your older relative, it helps to stay focused on what's best for your loved one. This will allow you and your siblings to get past rocky emotions and to make good decisions that are in everyone's best interests.

## Issues siblings may face

Even if you have always been close with your siblings, the needs of an aging relative can place a strain on everyone in the family. Brothers and sisters who have a tense relationship may find it particularly difficult to work cooperatively on behalf of their relative. When discussing the care and needs of an older relative, siblings may find that

- *Old patterns and behaviors may resurface.* It's not uncommon for siblings to slip back into their childhood roles when confronted with a family crisis. Siblings may accuse the sister who takes charge of the situation of being "bossy." They may criticize the less active sibling for being selfish. These attitudes can prevent family members from communicating effectively about what their relative needs.
- *Childhood rivalries may reemerge.* Confronting the frailties of an older relative -- especially a parent -- can spark renewed competition to be "the favorite." Brothers and sisters who want to be seen as "the good child" may be more concerned with pleasing the parent than making sound decisions about his needs. For example, an adult son may reassure his father that he won't let the other children take away his driver's license, even though the others agree it's no longer safe for Dad to drive. If you and your siblings disagree about what needs to be done, ask an objective party to step in. Your sibling (and your older relative) may be willing to take the advice of a clergy member, a healthcare professional, or your relative's attorney.

- *Responsibility may be unfairly distributed.* It's common in many families for one sibling to assume more of the burden of caring for a relative. Often, it's the sibling who lives closest to the relative, has the fewest career or personal responsibilities, or is the most nurturing. This sibling may feel overburdened and resentful. The other siblings may feel left out, guilty for not doing enough, or even jealous of the key role their sibling has taken. Try to work together to come up with a plan where you all contribute something. The sibling who lives out of town might take on the tasks of paying the bills and arranging for home health aides and meal delivery. The sibling who lives in town might oversee medical issues and visits to the doctor.
- *Geographic distance may make communication difficult.* Living far apart can make it challenging to discuss a relative's needs. A sibling who lives close to the relative may feel she's most familiar with the situation and she may discount her siblings' advice and suggestions. It's important to listen equally to everybody's feelings, suggestions, and opinions about what is best for your relative.

### **Starting the conversation**

How you approach your siblings with your concerns will depend on your relationship, the nature of your concerns, how much your siblings know about the situation with your relative, and other factors. While you should tailor your approach to your own situation, the following are some basic steps you can take to prepare for a conversation:

- *Assess the situation.* Determine what your relative's needs are. If necessary, get a professional opinion from a doctor or a geriatric care manager.
- *Find out what your older relative wants.* Unless your relative is mentally incapacitated, he should be involved in decisions about his life. Where does he want to live? How does he want to spend his money? If you ignore your relative's wishes, he may resist your attempts to help.
- *Share any information you have gathered.* Share any reports from doctors, financial advisers, or other professionals. Talk about any relevant conversations you have had with doctors and others about your relative's needs. Tell your siblings what your relative thinks. If you are just beginning to suspect your relative needs some care, be specific about your concerns. "I went to visit Aunt Shirley yesterday and she didn't recognize me. Last week, she locked herself out of her apartment and her neighbor found her sitting on the front stoop. I think she should see a doctor."
- *Talk with your siblings about what you are all going through.* Watching an older relative age and decline can be stressful and sad for everyone. We all deal with our emotions in different ways. One sibling may be weepy and sad while another may be frustrated and angry. Recognize that everyone deals with stress in different ways. You're not going to change who your siblings are. But you can

### 3 • Talking with Your Siblings About Your Older Relative's Needs and Care

change the way you relate to each other. Share what you are going through with one another. It will help bring you closer.

- *Put your relative first.* If you're caring for your elderly relative and want more support from your siblings, say "Dad needs more care than I'm able to give him," instead of, "You need to help me." Your goal is to work together on behalf of your relative. It's not a time to talk about who did or didn't do something in the past. Avoid saying hurtful things.
- *Avoid blaming.* Keep in mind everybody's other responsibilities. It's very easy to get caught up in who "should" be doing what for your relative. You can head this off by reminding yourself of your siblings' other obligations to family and work. If your sibling accuses you or one of your other siblings of not doing enough for your relative, say, "We all have a lot on our plates right now. Let's try to focus on how we can work together to meet Aunt Mary's needs." If your mother is becoming frail and forgetful and you're wearing yourself out with daily visits to cook her meals, clean her home, and drive her to appointments, instead of blaming or complaining, seek help from your siblings and others. Sometimes the primary caregiver will be reluctant to ask for help and siblings won't realize help is needed.
- *Come to a common understanding of your relative's needs.* By the end of the conversation, you and your siblings should have a clear understanding of your relative's needs. If you don't agree on how to meet them, you should at least understand one another's viewpoints. Agree on your next steps. "John will find a good neurologist and make an appointment for Dad. Abby will go to Dad's house and look into ways to make it safer for Dad to live there. Carol will check into Dad's insurance coverage. We will talk again on Thursday."

#### **Talking about ways to share responsibility**

It may not be possible for you and your siblings to assume equal roles in your relative's care. But even if one sibling does most of the work, look for ways to involve everyone to some degree, even if it's just to take Aunt Helen shopping once a week or to be the primary contact for your mother's cardiologist. Spreading the responsibility will ensure that no one person becomes overwhelmed or feels excluded.

- *Break your relative's needs into tasks.* It's helpful if everyone knows exactly what your relative needs. "Dad's walkway needs repair. He needs a ride to appointments. He would like to get out of the house more often." This will guide your decisions and help you figure out how each of you can pitch in to help.
- *Start with the simplest problems.* Tackle the easy ones first, such as who will research transportation services for your mother. Work up to the more complicated ones, such as whether you should ask your mother to sell the family

home and move into a smaller place. If family members see that some problems can be solved readily, they'll be less daunted by the larger tasks.

- *Make a list of "what ifs."* What if Dad doesn't answer the phone when you call? What if we learn he isn't paying his bills on time? What if the nursing home calls in the middle of the night? Prepare for the unknown and avoid second-guessing by deciding as a group what you will do if something unexpected happens.
- *Decide how you will make decisions about your relative's care and needs.* If your relative can't make decisions for herself, talk as a family about how choices will be made. You might decide that the sibling who is most involved in your relative's life will take care of routine decisions, such as hiring a contractor to install a ramp into the house. The big and important decisions, such as whether to move your older relative into a nursing home, might be reached as a group.
- *Be realistic about how each of you can help.* When one sibling does the most for an older relative, he may resent that his brothers and sisters are less involved. Discuss open and honestly one another's work and family responsibilities as well as your individual temperaments, your relationships with your older relative, and your skills and capabilities. You and your siblings may discover ways to help in smaller, but important ways. Your brother who is a single parent and works full time may be too busy with his job and his children to visit your elderly parents every week. But after discussing his schedule with you, he may realize that he can use his vacation time to stay with them for a week or two during the summer.
- *Accept that a sibling may not be able to help.* You may have a sibling who has distanced herself emotionally from your older relative. She may have little interest in being there for your relative. It's not a good idea to try to force her to be involved. Try not to get angry or upset with your sibling for not being involved. Accept that everyone is different and every relationship is different.
- *Consider hiring help.* Sometimes the best solution is to hire help. Agree as a family on what services are needed -- meal preparation, for example, or shopping for groceries. Decide how you will share the cost. Accept that some of you may be able to afford more than others.
- *Watch out for "family baggage."* You may find that some of your siblings resist the idea of pitching in together to help your relative. One may not believe that your older relative needs help, and another may want to provide all the care himself. Try not to get sidetracked by any opposition. Stick to the facts. Focus on your relative's needs and how you can bring people together to make sure that those needs are met.

## 5 • Talking with Your Siblings About Your Older Relative's Needs and Care

### Talking about finances

When discussing your older relative's care and needs, the topic of money is bound to come up. Your relative may need help with money matters. If she can no longer look after her own finances, you will have to decide who will do this for her. If your relative chooses one of you to manage her finances or be executor of her estate, the others may feel hurt or jealous. Money represents power and status. Those left out of financial decisions may feel slighted. They may wonder whether their relative or siblings think they're untrustworthy or incapable of handling money. When you discuss your relative's finances with your siblings, it's important to be aware that money is a touchy subject for many and feelings can easily be hurt.

- *Gather and keep thorough financial records.* When discussing money matters with your siblings, it's extremely helpful to be able to refer to financial records. Make copies of invoices and bank statements. When everybody has the same understanding of your relative's financial situation, you can avoid misunderstandings and arrive more easily at solutions.
- *Decide who will manage your relative's money.*
- *Focus on what needs to be done and find the best person for the job.* If your older or dependent relative needs help with routine financial tasks, such as balancing his checkbook, ask yourselves who is best suited to do this. Which one of you is most at ease being involved with your relative's personal finances? If none of you is, is there someone else in the family who would be willing to take this on, such as a cousin or an aunt? If your relative has substantial assets he can no longer manage, discuss hiring a professional. Bringing in outside help will ensure your relative's finances are managed properly and reduce the potential for friction among you and your siblings.
- *Be honest and open about what each of you can contribute to your relative's care or household expenses.* Ideally you will divide the expenses evenly. This isn't always possible. A sibling who earns far less than the others may not be able to contribute as much. If your relative's expenses are more than any of you can shoulder, talk with an elder care lawyer or geriatric specialist about other ways to fund her care, such as Medicare or Medicaid.

### Communicating over a distance

Living far apart can make it more difficult to keep one another updated on your older relative's situation. But geographic distance doesn't have to be a barrier to good communication among siblings.

- *Make a commitment to keep one another informed.* The sibling who assumes the role of primary contact with your older relative should keep the others updated. Keeping everyone informed will head off potential misunderstandings or

**6 • Talking with Your Siblings About Your Older Relative's Needs and Care**

unwelcome surprises and ensure that everyone is well equipped to make good decisions.

- *Have a neighbor or friend check in on your relative and let you know how he is doing.*
- *Schedule regular phone calls.* You and your siblings might decide to call one another weekly, monthly, or only when there's something to report, such as the results of a medical test. Regardless of how often you call, make a commitment to stay in touch by telephone.
- *Use mail or e-mail to share information.* Send your siblings information about your relative's health, routines, and daily life. Share photographs with one another.
- *Write letters.* Taking the time to compose a letter can help you organize your thoughts and gain a clearer understanding of your situation. Letters are a good way to share feelings and keep your siblings informed about your relative's situation.
- *Hold a family conference call.* Many calling plans offer conference call capabilities. Take advantage by getting all of your siblings on the phone at once.
- *Stay in touch electronically.* A family Web site and online instant messaging are good ways to keep one another informed and to stay in touch.

**When you disagree about a relative's condition or care**

Disagreements can prevent you and your siblings from sharing equally in your relative's care. A sibling who feels strongly that an older relative should move to a nursing home when the others disagree may become angry and less inclined to help with caregiving. Unresolved arguments can make a difficult situation even more stressful.

- *Try to let go of old conflicts and grudges and avoid rehashing the past.* If you're about to bring up an issue from the past, hold your tongue. If your sibling tries to pick a fight with you, avoid getting involved. You might say, "Let's focus on Mom's needs and how we can work together to make sure she gets what she needs." The more you're able to let go of old resentments, the more energy you'll have to focus on the caretaking challenges you are facing today.
- *Be ready to compromise, forgive, and move on.* If you do clash with a sibling, be the first to apologize. Try not to argue in front of your older relative, especially if he is in failing health. If you feel a fight coming on with a sibling, go to another room where your older relative won't hear you air out your differences.
- *Hold a family meeting.* A face-to-face meeting may help you arrive at a solution. Agree ahead of time what issues you will talk about, create an agenda, and set ground rules for keeping the discussion on track.

## 7 • Talking with Your Siblings About Your Older Relative's Needs and Care

- *Bring in a neutral party.* Often people who won't listen to each other will take the advice of an objective third-party, especially one who is familiar with the situation. This may be a member of the clergy, an elder law attorney, your relative's health care provider, a social worker, or a geriatric care manager.
- *Meet with a family therapist.* Choose a therapist who specializes in aging and is knowledgeable about family dynamics. A skilled therapist or social worker can provide insight and help you resolve your conflicts.

Working cooperatively with your siblings on behalf of your loved one will ensure that you make the right decisions and provide your relative with the best care. It's often challenging, but can result in better support for your older relative. It may also bring you and your siblings closer together as your family ages.

Developed with funding from Deloitte & Touche LLP USA, the IBM Global Work/Life Fund, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Texas Instruments, members of the American Business Collaboration.

Written with the help of Diane Piktalis, Ph.D. Dr. Piktalis has over 30 years of experience in aging, elder care, and corporate work-life programs. She is a work-life product director at Ceridian and a consultant to The Conference Board on the mature work force. We are grateful to the National Alliance for Caregiving ([www.caregiving.org](http://www.caregiving.org)) for their expert help in the development of this publication.

© 2006 Ceridian Corporation. All rights reserved.