

Your Family's Emotional Journey as a Relative Ages

Overview

What to expect as your relative ages and how to find emotional and practical support.

- Understanding and coping with the feelings you may have
- Finding common ground
- Supporting one another
- Finding joy in family

We all feel a range of emotions as our families age, our older relatives become frail or infirm, and we are forced to assume new roles and responsibilities. We feel sadness and joy, uncertainty and determination, and a deep sense of commitment to the people who loved and cared for us. Caring for an older or dependent relative together as a family is a challenging and rewarding experience. Knowing what to expect as you navigate this journey will help you through this time.

Understanding and coping with the feelings you may have

You may experience some or all of these feelings as your relative ages:

- *Role reversals.* As our parents age and become less independent, we often experience a role reversal -- the parent becomes more like the child and the adult child assumes the role of the parent. You've spent your whole life as a child looking up to your parents. Suddenly, they're turning to you for help and support -- with decision-making, caregiving, and other responsibilities. This role reversal can be difficult to deal with emotionally.
- *Sorrow and loss.* You may experience feelings of sorrow or loss not only about your parent's or older relative's aging and mortality, but also about your own. Your older relative is also experiencing feelings of loss. Try to be understanding of the losses you all may be feeling.
- *Stress.* Caring for aging relatives can be a time drain -- it takes time away from ourselves and our families. Whether you are caring for someone who lives nearby or at a distance, you may experience caregiver stress as your relative becomes less independent. "It's stressful because you're dealing with so many different feelings and issues at once," says Gail Gibson Hunt, president and CEO of the National Alliance for Caregiving. "You have your own emotional issues, family issues, and all of the organizational issues to deal with. This can be daunting and feelings of stress are normal."
- *Feeling overwhelmed.* Being responsible for the safety and well-being of an older or dependent relative, in addition to your work and other family responsibilities, can leave you feeling overwhelmed at times.
- *Guilt.* Most people caring for an older relative experience feelings of guilt at some point. Am I doing enough? Should I be spending more time with my mother? How will I live with myself if I have to place my older relative in a nursing home? Why didn't I do more to help before things got so bad?

- *Lingering resentment from the past.* If you didn't have the most positive relationship with your parent in the past -- for example, if you were the black sheep or the problem child in the family -- you may harbor resentment toward one or both of your parents still.

Finding common ground

Childhood rivalries and jealousies that you had growing up with your brothers and sisters may reemerge as your relative ages and as family caregiving becomes an issue. If you worked well together and were good decision-makers in the past, then it may be easier for you to deal with the challenges and decisions that you face now. If not, you will need to navigate these waters together in order to give your relative the best care and attention possible. Here are some suggestions:

- *As soon as you realize your older relative is going to need some assistance, hold a family meeting.* Bring everyone together to discuss your older relative's health, safety, living arrangements, and other issues of concern.
- *Try to focus discussion on the needs and preferences of your older relative.* Often, siblings have different opinions and begin to argue or try to convince others to go along with their points of view. Bring the discussion back to the older person's needs.
- *If you can't agree as siblings on how to deal with the issues, consider bringing in a geriatric care manager.* This is typically a nurse or a social worker who specializes in care for older people and who is familiar with local services and what's available in the area to provide assistance to the person you're caring for.
- *Try your best to let go of old conflicts, grudges, and rivalries.* It's important to try to pull together as a team in order to give your older relative the best care possible. Be ready to compromise with your brothers and sisters.
- *Make an effort to be flexible.* Flexibility will help you get through the hardest of times.
- *Focus on the love that you feel for one another rather than on the things that divide you.* This will help you keep the focus on your older relative's needs. As Virginia Morris writes in her book *How to Care for Aging Parents*, this time "may be your last opportunity to make peace."

Supporting one another

The more you build a network of support, the easier this time will be for everyone.

- *Involve your older relative as much as possible in decision-making.* Your older or dependent relative needs to be able to have a sense of independence and dignity and that means being involved in whatever decisions are made about his or her life and future as much as possible.

3 • Your Family's Emotional Journey as a Relative Ages

- *Stay in touch as a family to see how things are going.* Check in often with your siblings or other relatives to get their impressions of how your older relative is doing. This will help you all feel connected and will give you a sense of how your older relative is doing, especially if you're not there to see this on a day-to-day basis.
- *Set up an easy communication system,* such as a group e-mail list, so you can update each other after a visit or a doctor's appointment.
- *Tap into your older relative's support system.* Most older people living on their own have an informal support system that includes friends, relatives, neighbors, and perhaps people from the local faith community who come in to visit. Seek support from this circle or community of people.
- *Involve other family members as much as possible in caregiving responsibilities.* That includes brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, cousins and grandchildren.
- *Take your time to carefully consider and look at all of the options when you are facing big decisions as a family.* Listen to one another and allow everyone to have a voice.
- *Show your gratitude.* Thank friends, relatives, neighbors, and your older relative's health care providers for their efforts in ways that are meaningful to them. It might be something as simple as taking cookies or flowers to an aide or staff member.
- *Remember that your company's employee assistance program (EAP) or work-life program can offer help and support.* Contact the program for help with issues related to aging, finding services, navigating work and family responsibilities as your relative ages, and the many other concerns you may be facing as a family. There are many resources available through work to help you through this time.

Finding joy in family

Despite all the challenges families face as relatives age, most people find that this time of life offers tremendous opportunities for strengthening your relationship with your older relative and for family bonding. Caregiving is also an opportunity to reconnect and grow as a family, not just with your older relative, but also with siblings, cousins, and extended family.

- *Include your children in intergenerational activities as much as possible.* Children bring enormous joy to grandparents and other older relatives. Preserve family stories by writing them down, making a recording, or videotaping your older relative. Reminisce together. Looking through old photographs, scrapbooks, memoirs, news clippings, videos, films, and slides can spark wonderful conversations and memories.
- *Take the time to enjoy being with your older relative.* Once you have a plan and have put support services in place, try to spend time with your older relative just to be in each other's company. Reminisce about times you have shared. Talk about

4 • Your Family's Emotional Journey as a Relative Ages

things your relative has loved, such as gardening, sports, or cooking. This is your time to make peace with your loved one -- to put aside past grievances and resentments and understand your relative as a person. It is also a time to find things to enjoy together, even if it is only watching a favorite television program or playing card games. If the older person is able, perhaps you can share a hobby or take an occasional weekend together. Spending time just being together will help you grow closer.

Your family's emotional journey as your relative ages may be challenging at times. But for most people, the challenges are far outweighed by the tremendous rewards that come with caring across the generations. Make this a time for loving acts.

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