Caring for aging parents

Sharon just arrived home from a busy day at work. Her life has change dramatically since her mother, Anne, moved in with her six months ago. Sharon has had a hard time dealing with her mother's recent mood swings —one day she is fine, and the next she is irritable. Anne has also begun to tell Sharon how she should raise the children. Sharon has taken on many care-giving activities, such as driving her mother to the doctor, and managing her finances. Sharon loves her mother, but has had a hard time adjusting to the live-in situation, and the increased responsibility she's assumed.



Anne has been by herself all day. She feels extremely lonely and especially misses her husband who died last year. She also longs for the independence she had when she lived in her own home. Sharon seems to think she can't do a thing for herself. Anne feels useless being cared for by Sharon and the kids. Anne has noticed that Sharon seems preoccupied and irritable lately. Maybe Sharon does not want her in her home any longer.

In today's society, the scenario of Sharon and Anne is occurring on a more frequent basis. Advancements in medical technology and health care have greatly increased human longevity. This means that more and more middle-aged adults are caring for their aging parents. The form of care that adult children provide for their parents varies according to need and circumstance: parents may move in with their children; parents may live by themselves, but require ongoing assistance from their children, or parents may live in homes for the aged and still need a certain degree of help from family.

This reversal in the parenting role often gives rise to intense emotions and stress among both the aging parents and the adult children, which can severely impact their quality of life. This situation can be eased by being aware of emotions and expectations, and by considering all of the possible support available within the family and the community.

Understanding the Loss

Aging parents often feel intense loss when confronted with the many changes that they experience during this stage of life. At the same time, they have expectations regarding the type of help they would like from their children.

Aging parents may experience feelings of despair, sadness and anger. For example, Anne is feeling intense loneliness due to the loss of her husband. Furthermore, her self-esteem and sense of independence may be threatened as she realizes that she now needs help with day-to-day activities such as shopping or getting to a doctor's appointment. These feelings and experiences have overwhelmed Anne. At the same time, her family members may not understand why grandma or mom is behaving in such a different way. Being aware of many life changes that the elderly face, will help care-givers to understand changes in behaviour.

Another way to help in the caring process involves identifying the parents' expectations of the care they would like from their children.

The adult children must make their parents aware of the type of care they can provide for them. On the one hand, aging parents may have a definite set of expectations in relation to the degree of care that they would like from their children. In the case of Anne and Sharon, Anne may wish to remain independent and continue to care for herself. For example, she may be able to help out in some small way by folding the laundry or doing the dishes.

To clarify these expectations, some of the questions that the adult child can discuss with his or her parents are as follows:

- Does the parent want to live with a child or alone?

- Does the parent want to continue doing day-to-day activities or does the parent want the child to assist with these activities?

- Does the parent think he or she can manage alone when she or he cannot?

Identify Your Expectations

Adult children also have a set of expectations related to their role as care-givers. Some of the questions adult children should consider, are as follows:

- Can the aging parent live with the child or would a home for the aged be more appropriate?
- Does the child have sufficient financial resources?
- How much time can be devoted to the care-giving role?

The process of clarifying expectations can help to alleviate some of the frustrations that often arise in the care-giving situation. Specifically, if the expectations between a parent and adult child vastly differ, then much discussion and compromise must take place to decrease the potential for disappointment and anger that may be experienced by both parent and child.

Finding Help in the Community

An awareness of community supports and resources will also aid in the caring process. Resources within the community can provide the care-giver and parent with a wide range of information and assistance. Some of this information can be found by looking under the social services department in the phone book, in the municipal, city or local government section. This department can provide a wide range of resources such as day programs for seniors, and Meals on Wheels. The Meals on Wheels services delivers nourishing meals to the elderly in their homes.

In Sharon's case, she might encourage her mother to join a support group where she can meet with and spend time with other elderly people.

Care-Givers Need Support Too!

Although the focus of the care-giving activities is generally directed toward the aging parent, adult care-givers also need attention. It is not uncommon for them to feel overwhelmed and stressed as a result of this role.

Typically, one family member assumes the care-giving role. This primary care-giver may resent the fact that she or he has sole responsibility for taking care of the parent, which, in turn, may increase the stress level. In this situation, the adult child may find that time is severely limited due to the increase in responsibility. This situation can lead to feelings of guilt, anger, and frustration.

To help share the responsibility and to decrease the related stress level, the care-giver might consider involving resources such as a spouse, children, brothers, sisters, cousins, friends, and the like. These persons should be approached and asked for assistance in caring for aging parents. For instance, Sharon might plan to have her brothers and sisters help care for Anne by having her stay at their homes one weekend a month, and by having them run some of the errands. To ensure that this support is to be provided by family or friends, it may be helpful to have each person commit to carrying out a particular activity on a particular day of each week or month. In this way, Sharon can rely on having this time to spend on personal activities.

The care-giving situation can be a time when extreme tension can be experienced by both parents and adult children, but it does not have to be this way. When they openly talk to one another about issues such as needs and expectations, a sense of balance can be restored to the relationship.

When you make the decision to become a care-giver to a parent, a strange and new dynamic emerges. You are now in charge of your parent and your parent is no longer in charge of you. And this is only one of the ways that can make this adjustment trying for each involved. Throw into the mix the fact that maybe, the care-giver is already the care-giver to his or her children.

Finding the time and the resources to do it all, is a daunting task for one person, or even, one couple. Contact a counsellor to assist you with finding services suited for caring for your parent.