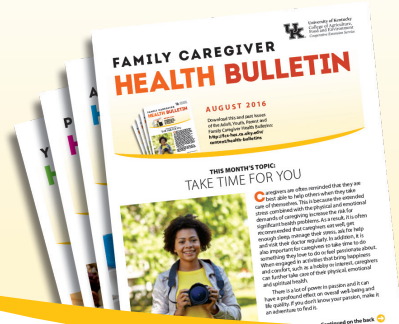




FAMILY CAREGIVER

HEALTH BULLETIN



JANUARY 2019

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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

CAREGIVING WITH SIBLINGS



When caring for aging parents, help from siblings and/or step-siblings can be supportive and welcomed, but it can also complicate matters and create additional stress (Caregiver Alliance, 2011).

Learning that your parents are sick or frail is never easy, and siblings often handle the news very differently. Some step up to the plate and immediately provide care and support. Others become worried or fearful and make things out to be worse than they really are. Some even go into denial over the situation, and the immediate and long-term needs.

This newsletter will highlight challenges in sibling caregiving dynamics as well as ways in which siblings can unite to be a caregiving team.

Sibling dynamics: The challenges

- Many adult children do not have a caregiving model or guide that helps them learn

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how to plan for or handle the physical, emotional, and financial sides of caring for aging parents.

- There are no clear rules or directions spelling out who should do what, when, and how.
- The way in which siblings handle loss and grief can affect the way they provide or avoid care and support.
- Caregiving can dredge up old emotions and sibling rivalries, sometimes without even realizing it.
- Assumptions are made. (So-and-so will become the primary caregiver because she lives the closest or because he doesn't have a job.)
- Families fall into stereotypical traps. (A son will handle finances and moving, while a daughter will shoulder the hands-on physical and emotional care needs.)

Siblings working together

- **Communicate.** Communicate. Communicate.
- **Understand where your siblings are coming from** as you analyze who is or isn't providing care, how much care each sibling is giving or who is in charge.
- **Don't excuse negative behavior, but try to walk in your siblings' shoes** to understand their pain, fear, and needs to help break down family conflict.
- **Prepare to care.** Families, including siblings and the older parents, need to communicate care wishes and specific caregiver roles, ideally, before a crisis occurs. Siblings should try to gauge their roles including how much time and money they can contribute.
- **Share information and keep the whole family informed** of health-care reports and related care issues. Use e-mail, online care-sharing tools, and/or face-to-face family meetings.
- **Recognize that old family roles and expectations might no longer work** or even be true, and re-examine people's current strengths and abilities for the new family situation.
- **Keep in mind that parents tell different children different things** about how they are doing, making it more important for siblings to talk with each other and share information about parental health.
- **Stay focused on the care essentials,** and be flexible. It is not the end of the world if your sister cleans a little differently than you do or purchases a different brand or type of cereal, instead, focus on what your parent needs for quality care.

- **Accept your siblings and parents for who they are,** not who you wish they could be. The better you are at accepting that people are not exactly like you nor will they do things exactly the way you do, the more likely you are to feel less conflict and more support.
- **Be careful of your tone,** and stay clear of making a sibling feel guilty. Ask for help and articulate your needs. Do you need money for respite? Help with specific tasks? Or just a thank you and additional emotional support?
- **Get help from outside professionals** when and if necessary. Family therapists, attorneys, physicians, social workers, clergy, etc. can help navigate family dynamics, complicated family histories, and power struggles.

It is important to keep care issues first, like whether Dad should move to a nursing home or whether Mom needs a new walker. Otherwise, emotions get out of proportion and discussions turn into sibling rivalry issues such as who cares more or who knows what is best.

When you or your siblings start criticizing each other for being "selfish, bossy, uncaring, and irresponsible" (Caregiver Alliance, 2011), or you feel that none of your siblings "understand" and that you are the only one who knows what is right, it might be time to take a time-out and focus on the care issue at hand versus fighting over what might be an old emotional sibling battle.

It is also important to understand your own emotions and try to walk in the shoes of your siblings to understand their side when in the throes of caregiving. Communicate what you need from each other, and if disputes or anger result, seek outside help so that you and your family come to an agreement and keep care needs first.

RESOURCE:

- Family Caregiver Alliance/National Center on Caregiving: (800) 445-8106; www.Caregiver.org; info@caregiver.org
- FCA CareJourney: Caregiver.org/carejourney
- Family Care Navigator: Caregiver.org/family-care-navigator

REFERENCE:

- Family Caregiver Alliance (2011). Written by Francine Russo and based on her book, *They're Your Parents, Too! How Siblings Can Survive Their Parents' Aging Without Driving Each Other Crazy* (2010), New York: Bantam. Retrieved <https://www.caregiver.org/caregiving-with-your-siblings>

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