

Sibling Troubles Revived

By Kate McCarthy

You grew up together. You learned, played and fought together as children and were the best of friends and the worst of enemies all at the same time. You know your brothers and sisters well but now that your aging parents need their children to actively help them, you may find working with your siblings to be far more difficult than you ever imagined.



Caring for aging parents can revive relationship troubles between siblings.

Martha's mother recently passed away. When looking back at the whole experience, Martha could say she was now at peace with it but deeply regretted the relationship damage that took place with her brother and sisters during the months leading up to her mother's death. Conflicts over large and small issues drove a deep wedge between the siblings. There was bickering over medications and doctor appointments. There was squabbling over spending time with mom. There was quarreling over who was to help with specific tasks. There were out and out fights over expenses. It was like all the adults in the family reverted back to childhood battle lines and no one was fighting fair.

United in crisis

Ideally, siblings will unite and work together to care for their parents when they are ill or become too frail to care for themselves. Yet in real life it is often a crisis that suddenly forces siblings to unite to provide care for an aging loved one. These crisis situations trigger a lot of family friction. Conflicts are made worse by brother and sister's fine-tuned ability to push each other buttons and relive childhood rivalries. Arguments over care sap the strength out of the family at the time when their parents need them to work together. It is also very upsetting to the aging parents who depend on their children for help.

To avoid conflicts sibling need to face the fact early on that they will someday be called on to care for their aging parents. Preventing disputes over how best to provide that care is ideally done long before any care is needed. Sitting down with parents before any care issues arise and discussing the realities of aging is the first step to keeping the family intact and working together through the care years later on.

Talk it out ahead of time

Long before the need exists, when the adult children are in their 40's and the aging parents are roughly in their early 70's, have a serious talk about the future. Gather the family and openly discuss the possible scenarios of the parent's future care needs. It may feel premature and a bit morbid to discuss your loved one's mortality, but it is foolish to pretend they will not age or face health issues someday. Most people avoid this uncomfortable discussion and wait until a crisis forces the issue and then they must make quick decisions which often lead to mistakes, conflicts and frustration. It is wise to talk about the parent's wishes and how they could be honored so the entire family has a framework for the future. Having a general care plan in place will go a long way if a crisis hits and also will serve to lay the ground work for future long term care.

Figure out who will do what

Recognizing off the bat that the division of labor will never be perfectly fair, discuss among the siblings who could do which tasks and how much money each would be willing to pitch in to pay for care if necessary. Try to roughly divide up the responsibilities according to ability. Sketch out a game plan that all members of the family can theoretically agree to. Don't assume that since you were all raised in the same family that you naturally agree on what is best for mom and dad. There will be some emotionally intense moments when you will not agree at all and these will test your bond as siblings, so try to define roles and rules ahead of time to ward off extra conflict.

Gather all the important documents

The sibling(s) with strong organizational and finance skills should be appointed the Power of Attorney for finances by the parents. Everyone in the family should have a clear understanding of under what situations that power would be activated and what tasks the Power of Attorney will take care of. This sibling should know where all the money and accounts are kept as well as all the insurance and investment paperwork. Once activated, the POA of finance should gather the titles to the house and cars, safety deposit boxes, keys and passwords for all accounts. They should review any long term

care insurance and all other insurance policies your parents have set up and understand the fine print about what is covered and how it will be covered. The sibling in charge of finances will take care of organizing all the important paperwork, arrange the payments for all bills and should keep the rest of the family informed. The POA of finances will become knowledgeable about their parent's financial details and be able to manage the available money to cover care and end of life costs. They will be responsible for exploring public assistance options if the funds run short.

Health Care Decisions

As parents age, their health care becomes an increasing concern. From managing their medications and doctor appointments, to helping with mild cognitive issues to working out end of life care, the amount of decisions can be overwhelming. The sibling who has been appointed POA of health care will have their hands full once their power has been activated. If the aging parents were clear about their health care directives and where they wish to be when full time care is needed, then the many decision will not be such a major source of stress. Yet even with clear guidelines in place there will be many health care issues where conflicting opinions between siblings cause strain. One family set a rule that the sibling present at the moment gets to make the decision and, once made, it cannot be second guessed. Even though all agreed to this rule in the beginning, the siblings found it quite difficult to abide by. Again, it is having a clear understanding of the roles and rules between siblings that make the care years easier to manage.

With long term family ties, a little grace will go a long way, especially when stressful situations demand a unified working cooperation. Know ahead of time that all decisions regarding the aging loved ones will not be unanimously accepted but agree to disagree nicely for the sake of the parents and future family relationships.



HomeAid Health Care
Helping Hands at Home

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