

Interdependence with Aging Parents

By Kate McCarthy

The relationship dynamics of family drastically shift over time. Children, once dependent on their parents, grow and mature to adults. Parents grow too and eventually reach an age where they need to depend more upon their adult children. This tends to cause a considerable amount of stress and anxiety for all involved. On average more than half of elderly over 85 need help with their daily life. It would seem natural that family would provide much of the care their elderly loved ones need. Yet many elderly and their adult children have difficulties finding a working balance between independence and providing care.



Independence is a deeply ingrained part of the American psyche. It is revered just as dependency is looked down upon. Many older Americans refuse to accept help, even from their adult children for fear of being dependant and a burden. Yet this deprives the elderly of needed assistance that promotes longevity and health as well as the opportunity for grown children to care for the ones who once cared and provided for them.

Most societies across the globe care for their aged within the family and only turn to outside caregivers in cases where medical issues demand it. In other cultures, generations of families co-exist, often in the same home, providing support and care for each family member as needed.

The multi-generational American family could greatly benefit from becoming more interdependent. But to achieve interdependence in a healthy way, families must rise above some common hindrances.

- **Filial Maturity** – Adult children need to accept their parents as individuals, recognizing their personal needs and goals and accept their imperfections as well as positive qualities. Filial maturity means relating to and supporting aging parents in an adult way and requires understanding, patience and respect.
- **Parental Maturity** - Elderly parents need to accept their adult children as adults. They need to rise above deep-rooted attitudes of being in control and graciously accept help from the younger generation.
- **Acknowledge Loss** – Both elderly parents and adult children need to come to terms with the loss that is part of aging. The elderly experience many losses. The loss of status, health, financial security, spouse and friends can cause despair and needs to be recognized by the family. The children of an elder experience loss too. Loss of the parent they once knew and depended on. Recognizing that loss as part of the circle of life instead of battling against it can help ease the transitions as relationships within the family continue to change.

- **Mixed Expectations** – The elderly and their adult children often have different agendas of what is important and requires assistance. The adult children worry about practical cares and safety issues. They see help with bathing, food preparation and the prevention of falls as important. Where the elderly are more interested in getting help with bureaucratic issues like managing health care or financial paperwork and can take offence at being offered help with daily needs. Having different agendas causes stress and can result in misunderstandings, anger and hurt feelings. When the elder parents and the adult children openly communicate their concerns and expectations there is a much better chance at a smooth relationships.
- **Avoid Role Reversal** - Assisting a parent with bathing and dressing or taking over their decision making roles can be uncomfortable for both generations. Elderly often resent and resist being treated as a child and adult children miss having their parents be parents. A role reversal is not easy or healthy for either generation. There are times when the adult children will have to make difficult decisions on behalf of their parents, but in general it is best to keep family roles intact. The elderly, no matter how frail, should maintain control of their own decisions and the adult children need to respect their parent’s desires.
- **Bring in Help** – Hire a home health caregiver to provide services for your elderly parents at home. An extra pair of helping hands will take care of the daily tasks and intimate cares that often cause conflict between the generations. Getting help inside the home works to maintain healthy boundaries and relationships in the family.

Sources:

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