



FACING EMOTIONS WHEN HELPING AGING PARENTS

Many adult children experience that *oh-no* moment when they realize their parent is growing old and needs help. It might come after a safety scare, hospital stay or the death of a close older relative. Seeing a parent's frailty for the first time can open a flood of raw emotion – fear, sadness, nostalgia, concern, anxiety, and even anger.

FAMILY DYNAMICS

Helping an aging parent can bring out the best and the worst in family members. Worriers may be consumed by “what ifs” and overwhelm others with anything and everything that could go wrong. Those who deny the person needs help may resist pitching in. Planners may take some time to explore options thoroughly. Take-charge types may push to make decisions “right now.” Opposing dynamics are further complicated if nearby family members feel they have an unfair amount of responsibility and those who live far away feel guilty or judged for not doing more.

Ideally, families will have discussed future care options with their aging parents and have a plan ready to go. But it's hard to plan for every scenario and even harder to prepare for uncertainty caused by emotions. There may be times when emotions cause some family members to second guess others' decisions or make new decisions in the heat of the moment that they'll regret when emotions subside.

Sorting out emotions and pulling together to serve their parent's best interests will help adult children better care for their aging parent while minimizing conflict.

SORTING OUT COMPLEX EMOTIONS

Emotions related to helping an aging parent are complicated and could include feelings of loss of the family home and/or their parent's role in the family, fears about money, unresolved issues with the parent, a realization of one's own aging and mortality, or resentment for being thrust into a demanding caregiver role, especially if they have their own children at home or jobs.

331.472.2078

2863 W. 95th Street, Suite 143-365

Naperville, IL 60564



www.charterseniorliving.com

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Even with the daunting day-to-day realities of helping an aging parent, tasks to be done, sorting of financial and legal issues, medical concerns, etc., the emotional toll can be the most taxing of all. And unresolved emotions can drive stress levels through the roof. So, what's a person to do? Well, there are as many answers as there are situations, but here are a few tips for common emotions:

ANGER is usually a secondary emotion that is covering sadness or telling you that a boundary may be needed. The trick with anger is to identify it, find a healthy way to express it, and let it go. To sort out anger, ask yourself:

- Am I feeling hurt by something someone said or did? Do I need to grieve, talk to someone to work things out, or let something go?
- Am I taking on too much, allowing myself to be treated poorly or saying yes when I mean no? Do I need to set a boundary or be more assertive?

RESENTMENT may come into play when one sibling is doing more than others. It can be a result of unmet expectations or feeling forced into the role of caregiver. It may be hard to admit resentment because you don't think you're entitled to feel that way. To sort out resentment, ask yourself:

- Am I taking on more than I should? Do I need to have a discussion with other family members and divide up responsibilities?
- Do I have unrealistic expectations of myself and others? Am I willing to let those expectations go?
- Self-care isn't selfish. What do I need to do to take care of myself?

WORRY is a natural part of helping an aging parent whose condition may be changing or uncertain. Worry can give us a false sense of somehow being in control when we feel out of control. But worry can become an obsessive focus on "what ifs" and lead to higher stress. To sort out worry, ask yourself:

- What can I control in this situation?
- How can I live one day at a time?
- What supports or checks can I put into place to help ease my concerns?
- Can I set aside a daily time for worry and then let it go the rest of the time?

GUILT is prevalent among family caregivers. Most guilt comes from having unrealistic expectations of yourself. If you often find yourself saying "I should," you are probably feeding your guilt. Be patient with yourself; you are doing the best you can. To sort out guilt, ask yourself:

- Am I being gentle with myself?
- Am I taking time to care for myself and asking for help?

If you and your family are struggling with emotions related to helping an aging parent, you are not alone. We at Charter Senior Living understand and are here to listen and be a resource for you through this journey.

