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Experience July/August 2019

- Hidden Causes of Stress as Parents Age
- Six Real-life Scenarios

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Are Your Adult Kids Driving You Crazy?

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Here are six common scenarios that arise as families age, along with tips for easing the tensions they create.

As an adult family mediator, I've seen many otherwise happy families begin to disintegrate as parents age. That doesn't have to happen to your family if you're aware of what's taking place and respond smartly. Here's what to know.

Roles can change when adult children and their parents navigate family decision making.

Hidden Causes of Stress as Parents Age

There are common triggers for tension that arise as families age together:

- Boundaries are changing, and roles are shifting. Problems may begin with the boundary changes that occur with awkward or untimely role reversals. Kids are trying to help, but it may feel like they're trying to take over.
- Unhealed sibling rivalry bubbles to the surface. This can interfere with their care of their parents or the parents' desires about how to be treated. Parents may unconsciously telegraph favoritism in the way they reveal information or ask for help.
- Families typically haven't planned for these changes. It's usually an emergency that exposes the lack of parents' planning.

One or all of these triggers is almost always present in an adult family dispute. But the ways they show up are endless.

Six Real-life Scenarios

If none of these situations seem familiar to you, lucky you. But odds are, you have experienced or will at some point face one of these predicaments.

1. “My kids are hounding me to move, but I’m not ready.” Rob, 87, lost his wife to cancer last year. He lives in a four-bedroom suburban home with a big yard, chock full of stuff accumulated during a 50-year marriage. The basement and garage are barely navigable.

Rob plays bridge with friends, attends a church, has full mental capacity, and refuses to move. He still drives. He’s healthy for his age, but he walks with a cane and gets winded climbing stairs. His bedroom is on the second floor, and the laundry is in the basement. The kids worry about the danger of falling and needing help. They’re insisting he move, and he’s tired of hearing it.

The underlying problem: Awkward attempts at role reversal. Rob doesn’t need a parent. He’s still a viable adult who wants to keep control of this own life. But his environment could be dangerous. This is a classic tug of war between safety and autonomy. Rob feels the kids are trying to take over. They’re hurt because he doesn’t see their love and concern.

What to do: Rob and the kids need to talk. More than that, they need to listen to each other.

Rob has heard what the kids think, but he hasn’t listened. He just says, “No.” If you’re Rob, here’s how to get unstuck.

Have a real conversation. (This works for other issues, too.) Invite the children to express their concerns. Demonstrate a willingness to take them seriously. (When it’s your turn to talk, if necessary, you can gently remind them you’re still a competent adult who gets to decide where you live.)

A genuine conversation begins with open questions—questions to which you don’t know the answers. Here are a few examples:

- You’ve said you think I should move. Can you say more about what you have in mind?
- What are your ideas about making me safer right here?
- What are your thoughts about where I might like to be?

Dad listens to understand, not argue. He might acknowledge when the kids make a valid point.

Then it's the kids' turn to ask questions. Here are good examples:

- Dad, what do you love most about this house?
- What would be the hardest thing for you about moving?
- How will you know when it's time to move?

Rob may want to stay because the house reminds him of happier days with his wife. He may love his garden, though he admits that mowing and raking is getting harder. He may like his “stuff”—his paintings and grand piano. Or he may just feel overwhelmed by the thought of downsizing.

Next, brainstorm solutions. Such deep, mutual listening will reveal a variety of possibilities for keeping Rob safer where he is: An alarm on his wrist to push if he falls. A motorized chairlift. Sending laundry out. Moving the laundry to the first floor. Hiring someone to clean the house and do the laundry. Turning the first-floor dining room into a bedroom and adding a shower to the powder room by taking out a closet. The list goes on.

When Rob needs to stop driving, he can use a private service or taxis. Or the kids can schedule driving Rob to his appointments. He can order groceries online. He'd lose some freedom, but a situation is doable if he's determined to stay put.

If everyone is willing, the kids could set some dates to help Rob tackle the “stuff,” one space at a time. They could share pizza and enjoy working together.

These solutions have one thing in common. They minimize role reversal by leaving Rob in charge but still provide real solutions to a real problem.

2. “My other kids are attacking my care-giving daughter.” Marie says, “When my husband began to show signs of memory loss, we invited our daughter, Melissa, to move in to help out. The other kids act as if I betrayed them. They won't speak to her or even come to my home when she's here. They keep saying I should sell the house and move into assisted living.”

The underlying problem: Unresolved sibling rivalry. This harsher version of the first situation involves unhealed sibling rivalry. Accusations fly as the siblings gang up on the sister who's trying to help. They think she's freeloading, even though Mom wants her there.

A latent money issue reveals itself in fear that Melissa will persuade Mom to change her will. (This may become a self-fulfilling prophecy if they keep it up!) Mom is at wit's end. She loves all her kids but isn't about to move—and she hates the way they're treating Melissa.

What to do: Mom can call in an expert. A place to begin might be to hire an aging life-care manager, called an ALC, who's usually a geriatric social worker or specially trained

nurse. The ALC will visit mom's home, looking at every room, including the kitchen and what's in the fridge. The ALC will notice cleanliness and order. In our example, the ALC will separately and privately interview Mom, Dad, and Melissa. The ALC will list Mom's meds and may ask permission to speak to Mom's doctors.

The ALC will make a written report with suggestions, such as installing grab bars or putting away throw rugs. It may include a list of ideas to reduce dementia-induced caregiving stress. If the ALC concludes that Mom and Dad are safe and well-cared-for in the home, Mom can share the ALC's findings with all of her children to combat their pressure to move.

The ALC might also recommend a family therapist, since the siblings' behavior seems extreme. This issue probably has a long history and isn't susceptible to mediation, which is issue focused and future oriented. Even if all the kids won't agree to see a therapist, parents can initiate steps on their own.

Clean up the toxic waste. One of the worst mistakes parents make is to favor one child over another or to reveal information to one child and ask that child not to tell the others. Sometimes the favoritism is perceived. Sometimes it's real.

It may be unconsciously based on personality, physical appearance, or interests (such as sports or arts) that align with the parent's. Whatever the cause, scars run deep, and Mom may want to reach out to accept responsibility and ask forgiveness from a child who feels disfavored.

Melissa and each sibling can also begin to reduce the toxicity. Siblings who long to improve relationships must summon the courage to ask themselves three things:

- How have I participated in this? Even if others are most at fault, did I play a part? Could I have done something different? Did I have unrealistic expectations? Did I make my expectations clear? Did I hold others accountable when I should have? Did I share information with them appropriately?
- What do I really know or only assume? It's time for open questions, such as: I know my sister is living at Mom's. I don't know whether she's freeloading, as I suspect, or really helping Mom. If she's really helping, what would the services cost if Mom had to pay for them? Is Melissa paying rent? Who's buying the food? Is Melissa working? Is she looking for a job? What's she sacrificing?
- What's my payoff for holding a grudge? Do I feel right and righteous? Am I an "innocent victim" who enjoys Mom's sympathy? Have I been cherry-picking history so I can blame others? When one sibling stops playing the blame game, the game itself will usually end.

3. "I'm a widower, in love with a widow I've known many years. We're thinking of living together, maybe getting married, even though we're both nearly 80. Our kids are freaking out."

The underlying problem: Role reversal. This is another form of boundary-challenging role reversal.

What to do: Have an open discussion in which all parties listen. Ask your kids, “What are you worried about?” They may be embarrassed to tell you. Chances are, it’s money, but they won’t want to sound greedy. If your companion has independent means, say so.

Then address the issues the children raise—and the ones they don’t. If your partner agrees, consider making the following offer: “Would you feel more comfortable if we had a prenuptial agreement?”

But money’s typically not the whole story here. Emotions may also be fragile. Everyone grieves differently. Kids may feel you’re somehow betraying their dead parent. You can reassure them that you did love their parent and will always cherish that person’s memory. But we’re capable of loving more than one person. The late parent wouldn’t have wanted you to be alone. And you deserve to be happy in your later years.

4. “I’m updating my will. My kids are wondering how much money they’ll get. Should I tell them?”

The underlying problem: Fear of the unknown and potential unresolved sibling rivalry. Remember the third and fourth hidden causes of problems? This is similar, involving a parent’s failure to plan or to reveal a plan—and money, again.

What to do: Take several steps. Follow a multi-part plan for handling this situation. Of course you have a testamentary plan. Tell every child the name of your personal representative or trustee and where to find the original documents.

Explain why you chose the PR you did. (Oldest child? Closest geographically? Only lawyer in the family?) If sibling rivalry runs deep, you can look outside the family. A lawyer or CPA as PR may cost the estate more but be worth it in the hassle avoided.

To avoid a legacy of permanent estrangement between children, hesitate before leaving unequal amounts to your kids. If you must, look for another way to help a needier child.

You may want to give your children a copy of the will. I’ve shared my will but not dollar amounts because those amounts are unpredictable, and I’d rather not tempt my heirs to begin thinking of my money as their money.

Finally, whatever you tell one child, tell all of them. Secrets can poison their relationships.

5. “The kids are fighting over my powers of attorney and health care proxy.”

The underlying problem: Role reversal and possible unresolved sibling rivalry. Are these problems starting to make sense when you understand the underlying causes?

What to do: Explain your reasoning. Again, tell everyone whom you chose and why. Name alternates. Give everyone copies or tell them where to find the documents. If you want to spread the wealth, choose one child to handle health care, another for finances, and another as PR or trustee.

6. “My wife fell and broke a hip. She’s in a recovery center. I have cancer. The kids are desperate to help. I’m feeling desperate myself!”

The problem: A failure to plan. It’s best to consider the worst that can happen and then take steps to have in place just in case.

What to do: Get your plan going. Your Plan B for contingencies should already be in place. If it’s not, make it now with your wife and kids. Include where you want to live if you can’t go home. What can you afford? What will you need? Who will help?

Create or update your living will/advance directive naming treatments you want or don’t want at the end of your life, where you want to be buried, the kind of funeral you want, and other needs you foresee. This may feel dark, but it will lighten everyone’s load at your life’s end.

If these situations sound familiar, tackle the root causes first. Then your family can live in peace as you grow older. Warning: A risky but necessary conversation may be required. But you can do it!

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