The Emotional Uncertainty of Helping Aging Parents

Many adult children of an aging parent experience a moment when they realize for the first time that their parent seems to be getting old. It might come after a hospital stay or a major life event like the death of a spouse, when the elder appears frail and weaker. This realization can open the door to a plethora of emotions including fear, sadness, nostalgia, concern, anxiety and even anger. It is in that moment that the emotional uncertainty of helping someone who is aging begins. And, if conditions arise that lead to the need for intervention, the emotional meter can go off the charts.

Family Dynamics

The good news is, families enter this journey together. But there is bad news: yes you guessed it — families enter this journey together. Helping an aging parent can bring out the best and the worst in everyone. A variety of reactions will occur when there is a need for the older person to have help. Generally, each person’s response will be in line with their usual personality — but exaggerated. Those who tend toward worry will worry, those who like to deny may be missing in action, the “researcher” will start gathering information and the “in charge” person may want to control. These dynamics are further complicated with family members who live close to the loved one feeling that they are taking on too much and those who live far away feeling removed and guilty.

Hopefully families have begun to have a conversation about aging and future options before there is an immediate need for the older person to have help. When and if a precipitating event occurs, this pre-work will make things easier. But, still there will be emotional uncertainty, and most likely a period of feeling off kilter will ensue when the time comes to make care decisions with and for an older person.

Navigating these waters as a family will be made easier if everyone can pull together and keep the best interest of the older adult in mind. Dividing up responsibilities with everyone agreeing to their roles can also help to minimize conflict.

Sorting out the Complex Emotions

For most adult children the emotions related to helping an aging parent are complicated, because while helping the parent deal with their emotions, the adult child is processing their own feelings. These might involve feelings of loss of the family home and/or the parents role in the family, fears about money, unresolved issues with the parent, a realization of one’s own aging and mortality, and resentment for being thrust into a caregiver role during what is most likely a very busy season of life. And then there is the ever-present, seemingly universal, guilt.

As if it were not enough to have the daunting day to day realities of helping an aging parent, with decisions to make, tasks to be done, sorting of financial and legal issues, medical concerns, etc., the emotional toll can be the most exhausting of all. And, this drives the stress levels through the roof.
So, what is a person to do with all of the emotions that accompany this season of life? Well, there are as many answers as there are situations, however, some general principles exist that you can apply to most circumstances.

Feelings of stress during a time of change for your aging parent are normal. It is not unusual to find that you are dealing with emotions like anger, resentment, worry, and guilt. Here are a few tips for navigating through those feelings:

- **Anger:** Anger is something we all feel from time to time. Usually it is a secondary emotion that is covering sadness or telling you that a boundary may be needed. The trick with anger is to identify it and find a healthy way to express it and let it go. To sort out anger ask yourself:
  - Am I feeling hurt by something that 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:** Resentment is an emotion that may come in to play in families where one sibling may be doing more than others. It can be a result of unmet expectations or being placed in a position to care for someone where you feel you have no choice. It may be hard to admit that you feel resentment because you believe you should not have such feelings. 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?
  - What do I need to do to take care of myself?

- **Worry:** 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 do I have control over in this situation?
  - How can I live one day at a time?
  - What supports or checks can I put in to 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:** Guilt is a universal emotion for those who are caring for a loved one. Most guilt comes from having unrealistic expectations of yourself. If you find yourself saying “I should’ often, you are probably feeding this feeling of guilt. Be patient with yourself, you are doing the best job you can. To sort our guilt ask yourself:
  - Am I being gentle with myself?
  - Am I taking time to care for myself and asking for help?

If you are feeling these and other emotions related to helping an aging parent — you are not alone. At Brookdale Senior Living we understand this emotional uncertainty and are here to listen, understand, and partner with you to help you find a solution.
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