

How To *deal with adult sibling relationships*

Family caregiving and adult sibling relationships

By [Mary Brintnall-Peterson](#)

MADISON, Wis.— “Sibling relationships are the only close family relationships with the potential to last a lifetime,” says Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist in aging. “Our contact with our siblings increases as we age.”

As people move from middle age to older adulthood, they often feel emotionally closer to their siblings and have less conflict. Even those over 80 years old have an average of one living sibling. And a majority of older adults consider one of their siblings to be a close friend. We share biological and cultural heritage with our siblings, as well as memories based on shared history.

When siblings leave home to establish their own lives, it isn't unusual for their relationship to lapse during the early and middle years of adulthood.

“Often, what brings siblings together in later life is the need to care for their parents,” Brintnall-Peterson says. “Brothers and sisters who have not had much contact for years may find themselves working together to coordinate care for one or both of their parents.”

Most adults experience at least some denial of their parent's aging process until a critical event forces them to reconsider the parents' health and functioning, says Brintnall-

Peterson. How adult siblings handle the changes in their parent's need for care depends on the history of their relationship. If they have been close, the tasks tend to be divided more equally. In other cases, siblings tend to distance themselves emotionally from one another under the stress of caregiving. Old patterns of rivalry or conflict may arise.

When conflict arises over caregiving responsibilities, it is often about an unequal division of tasks. Research has found that these conflicts are more common between sisters who assume the bulk of care responsibilities. It can be especially difficult when siblings have different perceptions of the parent's needs. These differences commonly have to do with conflict over whether the parent should be placed in a nursing home or remain at home, regardless of the sacrifices the rest of the family must make.

Siblings may try to recruit the support of health care professionals involved in the parent's care. Sometimes social workers, doctors and nurses hear two separate versions of the home situation, making it difficult for them to make informed recommendations.

Siblings participate in caring for their parents in different ways and have their own style of caregiving participation when providing help:

- Routine help. An adult child may provide care for the parent on a daily basis.
- Backup help. An adult child may not be routinely involved in parent care, but can be counted on for special emotional support or tangible aid when asked by the sibling who does give routine help.
- Limited help. An adult child may limit the help they provide to the parent. For example, a brother may leave most of

the parent care to his sister while he takes responsibility for the parent's finances.

- Sporadic help. An adult child may provide occasional assistance to the parent when it's convenient. For example, a daughter who lives in another state may maintain little contact with the parent except occasionally to provide help during a holiday visit.
- Dissociation. An adult child may choose not to participate in any care for the parent. This is often the result of a long history of a troubled relationship between the parent and child.

The styles of caregiving participation among siblings also tend to be related to gender. Sisters are more likely to use routine or backup styles, while brothers tend to have a sporadic or limited style, often limited to financial management or home repairs. However, research shows that when there are only male children in the family, brothers appear willing to cooperate with one another to meet the parent's need for care.

Siblings' expectations of one another's caregiving responsibilities often follow traditional sex roles. A brother may resist his sister's efforts to involve him with the physical aspects of care. He may be willing to handle paying bills or home repair, but expect her to assume the daily housekeeping tasks. An unfair burden may fall on those who live closest to the parents. Unfairness can also result from differences in occupation. If a sibling is unemployed, works part-time, or is a homemaker, they may be expected to shoulder a greater burden of the care.

If families are alert to these tendencies, they can try to distribute the tasks on the basis of fairness and family strengths.

Brintnall-Peterson recommends that family members build on their strengths for sharing caregiving tasks. Tasks can be determined by the skills and preferences, location and physical health of the adult children. They may also take into consideration each other's motivations and emotions, other dependents and whether they have blocks of time versus intermittent time available to help out. Examples of tasks assigned in this way are: taking responsibility for the upkeep of a parent's home, paying bills, delivering groceries and medicines, preparing meals to freeze or paying to have meals prepared or delivered.

Out-of-town siblings can contribute to caregiving in a number of ways, giving some relief to siblings who live nearby, and staying connected to their parents and siblings. Routine and regular phone calls are an emotional lifeline. An extension phone can allow both parents to participate in these calls and gives equal time to each. Exchanging phone numbers with a parents' neighbors for an occasional call about your parent's well being can be reassuring.

Brief, newsy letters are especially good for older people with memory loss, who may forget the contents of a phone conversation. They can enjoy reading the letters more than once and even seeing them on the kitchen table can be a pleasure. Recording and sending tapes can also be a fun way to share family events. Clippings, photographs and books might be easier to send for family members who are not letter writers.

In addition to sharing the burdens of parent care, the older adult years can be a time for siblings to become closer, sharing travel and friendship, and looking back on family memories with nostalgia.

“Sibling relationships can enrich our lives as we age,” says Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist in aging. “Nurturing these relationships in later life is important, as they may be our strongest surviving support system.”

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