

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Caregiving is a Family Affair

As a child you probably didn't like it when others compared you to your siblings. Now, as an adult caring for an aging parent, those similarities and differences can continue to influence the challenges your family is facing.

You and your siblings each have a unique relationship with your parent. You've each played particular roles in the family. Those roles have been shaped over your lifetime. So it's not strange that we fall back into our family roles when everyone gathers.

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It's a small wonder then that when it comes to helping your mother or father, there may at times be some differences of opinion, even some friction.

These are some points to consider about dealing with family conflict over caring for an aging parent:

The best way to begin to handle a potential conflict or difference of opinion is to sit down and talk it over with your siblings before there's a medical crisis or other emergency. This meeting doesn't have to be formal. Plan a conference call to chat. Or you may just want to make some time at the next family get-together. Be sure to include your parent in meetings.

Take time to prepare for these meetings. Gather information that will be shared and that will help in decision making. Maybe you'll need input from a professional who can add an expertise that the family doesn't have.

Together, make a list of the "what ifs" and come up with some workable solutions. The important thing is that everyone has an opportunity to talk and help in any decisions that need to be made. This means that everyone must respectfully listen to each other.

Make assignments: staying in touch with the doctor, handling finances, seeing to it that home care is provided and all the rest. Schedules can be set up: Who's driving Dad to the doctor when? Who's going to be with Mom on what days? (Or, for an out-of-town siblings, who's going to call her when?)

Sometimes siblings just can't be in the same room with each other without arguments. There may be a lot of family dynamics going on here: anger, resentment, disagreements over money, a history of abuse, alcoholism and so on. If that's the case, try to find someone respected by the family members to facilitate the meeting. This may be a time when it's necessary to set aside differences—call a temporary cease-fire—and deal with taking care of a parent.

Here are some things to remember when the family discusses this challenge:

--Out-of-towners (long-distance caregivers) and those who live nearby are going to have different perspectives. It's a time for everyone to learn.

--A visit home can give a long-distance sibling a chance to offer the primary caregiver some time off. And the local sibling should make sure the long-distance brother or sister has some time alone with Mom or Dad.

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--If you are the primary caregiver, don't be shy about asking your siblings for help. They may not know what to do. They may feel a little intimidated because you seem to be doing everything so well. Sometimes it helps to offer a couple of choices: "Can you take Mom to the doctor's on Tuesday afternoon or stay with her Saturday morning?" And when they help, remember that how they perform a task might not be how you would do it, but both ways may be right.

--There can be incredible strength and comfort in numbers. Common concern for Mom or Dad doesn't have to splinter a family; it can bring members closer together. □