

# AGING PARENTS – DIFFICULT DECISIONS

A Clinician's Perspective

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The phenomena of aging parents (and relatives) and the accompanying decisions that must be made about their future care is not new. However, it is becoming increasingly prominent in our culture as our parents age and the baby boomers approach or begin their retirement. In effect, the “me” generation is now having to face the difficult decisions that are associated with difficult questions about “them”! Anyone working within the field of mental health realizes that such decisions can often be accompanied by many other emotional issues that make the decision-making process extremely difficult. In this article, I will look at some of the emotional issues that children face when trying to cope with the needs of their aging parents and other relatives.

Before beginning, I want to be absolutely clear that I am not for or against the concept of aging parents moving in with their adult children. In some cases, having an aging parent in the home can be an incredibly enriching experience and one that benefits everyone no matter what their generation. In other cases, the results can be absolutely disastrous causing a great deal of distress and chaos within the family. The purpose in preparing this article is to help people understand some of the issues that need to be addressed before making such an important decision. Such decisions are based on a number of different variables and factors that most people are not able to clearly identify when in the midst of grappling with such an important issue. It is hoped that by identifying some of these issues, it will make the process of coming to the best decision for all concerned somewhat easier and hopefully, more successful in terms of an outcome. As you will notice throughout the article, I also recognize that such decisions may somewhat need outside intervention by an experienced clinician who can provide an objective third perspective. If this article makes it easier for one family to come to the best possible decision by considering the relevant issues, then it will have accomplished its purpose.

In considering the question of emotional issues, it's important to see this stage of our life as being part of a process. We do not live out life in discrete units. Rather, each stage of our life is intricately interwoven with everything that has gone before and often our hopes and dreams for our future. Decisions regarding our aging parents can impact on every aspect of our being including our self-identity, our self-esteem, how we see ourselves conducting our life, our perception of ourselves as a caring child of our parents, and many other issues too numerous to list. It's no wonder that what can appear a relatively easy decision or choice to outsiders becomes emotional laden and extremely difficult for those in the throes of making such decisions. What can seem so clear when it's happening to others can quickly become extremely complicated as past and future issues come into play in the decision-making process. Let's look

at some of the ways in which our own emotional issues can impact on our ability to make the best decision about our aging parents.

One of the many questions that many people confront is whether or not to take an aging parent into their own home so that they can care for them on a day-to-day basis. As people facing this decision quickly learn, such a question brings into play not only the adult child's sense of responsibility but also their emotional issues and the emotional issues of the aging parent. When considering such a question, it's absolutely vital that it be recognized from the onset that the outcome of such a decision can have a significant impact on every member of the family, both immediate and extended.

For example, inviting an aging parent into the home can have very significant consequences for your relationship with your mate. Issues can arise about "taking sides", the additional financial burden, whose actually running the household if the aging parent tries to assert their authority and independence, should the aging parent contribute part of the pension/savings to the monthly expenses, and how will differences of opinion get resolved. Most relationships have periods when differences occur. These differences may get discussed in various ways until they are resolved. If one person has an aging parent in the home, it can create a process called "triangulation" which means that two people end up being opposed to one person creating an imbalance of power. It's not always a problem when the aging parent sides with the adult child's partner in a dispute. It's very important that both adults in the home discuss these issues openly and completely in trying to decide whether to bring an aging parent into their household. While you may have the best of intentions, the consequences can be less than pleasant unless everyone understands the conditions under which such a decision would take place.

Some of the other emotional issues that may arise during the course of such a decision process include unresolved anger, frustration, and guilty feelings between the adult child and the aging parent. The adult child may go through a variety of emotions depending on the unresolved issues. These can include feeling anger toward the parent because the adult child has been put in the position of having to make such a decision even though cognitively they understand how such a situation developed. There may be resentment if the adult child does not feel that the aging parent has always treated them fairly throughout their lifetime. Questions may arise such as "Why is it my responsibility? Why does it always have to be me to make the difficult decisions?" and thoughts such as "It's happening again, mom/dad is taking advantage of me just like they always did".

When such thoughts occur, the adult child may then start to feel guilty at having such thoughts which can lead to further resentment, anger and other powerful emotions. Those emotions may end up being played out within their relationship with their mate which can create difficulties in the home before the aging parent ever arrives. Such issues can seldom be resolved by a simple suggestion such as "Just get over it" or other such directive no matter how well meaning it may be. However, with assistance from an experienced professional, the adult child can often resolve those issues relatively quickly. If they are not resolved before the aging parent moves into the home, they usually become ongoing. At times, they can have a very negative impact on the functioning within the family for months or even years to come.

The presence of an aging parent in the home can have a significant impact on any children or adolescents that are still living with their parents. It's one thing to have grandma or grandpa visit for a specified period of time. It may be something quite different to have an aging parent in the home on an ongoing and constant basis. Once a person has been a parent, it's very difficult to give up that role, particularly if something happens that in the aging parent's opinion needs to be addressed immediately. When this happens, the child or adolescent may become resentful at having yet a third "party" to whom they are accountable, particularly if the expectations of the aging parent are different from the child/adolescents actual parents.

Problems can also develop between the aging parent and the child/adolescents actual parents regarding child-rearing practices and expectations. Since there is a significant age gap, expectations can be quite different between the two generations. Often, new parents decide to make significant changes in their parenting styles based on things that happened to them as children that they didn't appreciate or find acceptable. When the aging parent sees the differences, they may interpret the changes as being a criticism of their parenting abilities or begin to feel guilty that they didn't do a "better job" of raising their own child.

Discussing such issues can require a delicate balance of honesty and empathy if you're going to avoid having the problem escalate and blown out of proportion. Given the sensitive nature of such discussions, many people find it helpful to have the discussions within the relative safety and support of an experienced therapist. Unfortunately many people try to deal with the issues themselves only to find that the tensions quickly escalate resulting in frayed tempers and a lot of misunderstanding. Unless the adult child has enjoyed a relatively healthy relationship with their parent throughout their lifetime, such issues may be better resolved with the aid of a well trained clinician.

Another topic that many people don't discuss in enough detail is the kind of lifestyle that you will expect your aging parent to have within your home. If the aging parent is used to an independent lifestyle, has enjoyed good health, and is used to being in charge of her/his own life, trying to maintain similar expectations may impact on many aspects of the family's functioning. For example, is the aging parent going to have their own separate section of the home including a separate entrance? Are they going to continue to be able to freely invite friends and other people into their living space as they have been used to doing when they lived by themselves? Even a relatively simple topic such as where their visitors will park when they come to visit can cause some dissention.

Another topic that many adult children have a great deal of difficulty discussing with their aging parent is that of sexuality. If the aging parent is going to move into your home, is it going to be acceptable for them to have female/male intimate friends visit and possibly stay overnight? Such questions can activate unresolved issues regarding the deceased parent for the adult child or resurrect resolved emotions perhaps having to do with perceptions that the adult child was not treated with respect by the aging parent at various times during their relationship. As difficult as such topics can be, its essential that they be openly and honestly discussed before any final decisions is made about having an aging parent move into the home. If such issues are not discussed and resolved, they can create problems for both the adult children and the aging parent which is not fair to either generation.

Obviously, there are a host of other topics and questions that need to be discussed as well. Is the aging parent going to eat their meals with the family or have their own cooking area which will allow them more independence but perhaps raise some safety issues? What role will the adult child and their family play in the life of the aging parent? Are they there to supervise, support, guide, or provide some other kind of roles? As the aging parent grows older, what are the expectations on all sides for what will happen as the aging parent becomes less able to care for themselves. At what point if any is the question to be addressed of whether its time to consider more extensive care for the aging parent, perhaps with placement in some form of care home? Some adult children agree to provide care for an aging parent with the understanding between their siblings that this will result in some monetary compensation from the estate of the aging parent who requires the care. However, if the aging parent is not brought into those discussions, their Will may not reflect this expectation and can create hard feelings if some of the siblings decide that such an uneven distribution of the estate is now warranted. Unless such matters are addressed clearly prior to the aging parent coming into the home, it can result in bitter and costly legal battles that are destructive to everyone and can create a lot of ongoing strife in the extended family, not to mention unresolved family bitterness.

The impact of having an aging parent in your home on an ongoing basis can also have a significant impact on your own social life as well as your relationship with that parent. In all probability, when the aging parent has visited previously they have been included in the family activities and felt very much a part of the family. However, when they begin to live in your home on a full time basis, are you going to want to include them in everything you do? For example, if you invite friends over for a dinner party, will you also include your aging parent? When you plan a holiday with your family, will the aging parent be part of the planning process and included in the trip? It's healthy for adult children and their aging parents to have some separation and distance between their lives. However, previous experience may result in expectations on the part of the aging parent that need to be addressed prior to any decision to have her/him move into your home. If expectations are not discussed prior to such a decision, the aging parent may end up feeling hurt and rejected when they are not included in all of your socializing and family activities. When they are included, you may find yourself worrying more about whether they are "fitting in" or having a good time than spending the time enjoying the company of your close friends. All of these issues can be determined prior to an aging parent move into your home is a recipe for potential disaster in the future.

The psychotherapists at Waterman & Associates have the knowledge and experience to help you resolve such difficult decisions in a positive and healthy manner. Some of the therapists have had personal experience in making such decisions concerning family members. In many cases, helping you clarify what the issues actually are, helping you to understand the possibly resolve some of the emotional issues that are making such a decision difficult, and helping you to consider the various options that are available to you can all be very beneficial. Many people feel ashamed or wonder what's wrong with them if they don't immediately decide to invite an aging parent to move into their home. It's important to realize how complex such a decision actually is and that it's normal to struggle in making such an important decision that will impact significantly on your life. It is often worthwhile having several sessions to discuss and clarify the issues at the beginning of the decision making process. The experienced clinicians at

Waterman & Associates will work with you in caring, respectful and understanding manner to help you come to the best decision for everyone involved. To access our services, you may contact us in the following ways:

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