



## Caring for Aging Parents: Bridging the In-Town/Out-of-Town Divide

by Josie Padro



Sibling relationships are often the longest relationships people experience in their lives. Usually born in the same era, siblings grow up listening to the same music, following the same fashion trends and experiencing the same technological changes. They can be a great support to each other throughout life. When caring for aging parents, however, differences in perspective, priority and history can strain long-established ties.

In many cases when a parent needs care —whether it's hands-on or coordinating health providers—the task falls to one sibling. Relatives who are less involved because they live out of town or have other obligations may not know how to contribute. Resentments can develop, with some caregivers feeling overburdened and other caregivers feeling powerless or left out.

Adult children who actively care for a parent often feel that out-of-town siblings lack understanding of their parent's abilities and condition. Shouldering the care in addition to feeling frustrated and abandoned can be stressful.

Clarissa P. Green is a counsellor whose research and clinical practice focuses on mid-life family issues. She has some practical advice for siblings whose parents need care.

Green points out that siblings who provide most of the care become expert in how best to be a caregiver. They learn much about their parents' physical and emotional needs and how

to meet those needs. Their skill and comfort can be intimidating, since out-of-town siblings feel less confident in their own knowledge and ability to care for their parent. This lack of confidence or worry can often be expressed—and interpreted—as criticism.

The in-town sibling can help open up lines of communication by being clear and honest about what they need, which can be a challenge for those who find it difficult to ask for help. “Sometimes those of us who are in-town experts need to specifically invite a brother or sister into the experience. Ask them what they think, how they would approach a situation,” says Green.

Because the main caregiver is seen as competent, their siblings may not realize they need a break from the job. Giving out of town family members an opportunity to take over the care will give them valuable time with their parent. It will also allow the in-town sibling to step away and recharge.

Out-of-town siblings can be fresh eyes, providing a new perspective that the primary caregiver may overlook. A sister’s input helps them feel included and respected.

Siblings who are not hands-on caregivers may need extra time to process information when they’re in town for a visit. Green points out that it can take some time to catch up emotionally to parents’ changing and declining abilities, so it’s wise to plan for this.

Out-of-town siblings can be supportive in a number of ways. The first thing they can do is to plan their visits well in advance. They can ask their brother or sister to draw up a list of what kind of help they would find most useful. Household help is always appreciated. That can take the form of housekeeping services, pet care, or income tax help. Gift certificates for restaurants, gas or phone cards are often welcome gestures of support.

Planning future care helps families avoid conflicts that can arise between siblings. The most common areas of conflict centre on styles of caring, finances and old emotional issues. Green finds families who cope best have made plans for how they will care for their aging parents. “I urge people to talk about this. Ideally, we talk about this before a parent gets ill,” she says.

Maintaining the lines of communication between in-town and out-of-town siblings goes a long way toward allowing family members to feel supported and included. Finding ways to do this requires a little trial and error. Conference calls are one good way to get everyone together, and using an agenda will help ensure that everyone’s concerns are respected and addressed.

In every family there exists a whole constellation of relationships; each one is unique and

each one needs to be nurtured. Green advises visiting siblings to not only spend time with their parent, but also to also spend time with their siblings and to maintain two lines of communication—one with their parent and one with each sibling. She emphasizes the importance of keeping family ties up to date and strong, so that after parents have passed away sibling relationships will continue to thrive.

Welcoming a brother or sister's input helps them feel included and respected.

Siblings who are not hands-on caregivers may need extra time to process information when they're in town for a visit. Green points out that it can take some time to catch up emotionally to parents' changing and declining abilities, so it's wise to plan for this.

Out-of-town siblings can be supportive in a number of ways. The first thing they can do is to plan their visits well in advance. They can ask their brother or sister to draw up a list of what kind of help they would find most useful. Household help is always appreciated. That can take the form of housekeeping services, pet care, or income tax help. Gift certificates for restaurants, gas or phone cards are often welcome gestures of support.

Planning future care helps families avoid conflicts that can arise between siblings. The most common areas of conflict centre on styles of caring, finances and old emotional issues. Green finds families who cope best have made plans for how they will care for their aging parents. "I urge people to talk about this. Ideally, we talk about this before a parent gets ill," she says.

Maintaining the lines of communication between in-town and out-of-town siblings goes a long way toward allowing family members to feel supported and included. Finding ways to do this requires a little trial and error. Conference calls are one good way to get everyone together, and using an agenda will help ensure that everyone's concerns are respected and addressed.

In every family there exists a whole constellation of relationships; each one is unique and each one needs to be nurtured. Green advises visiting siblings to not only spend time with their parent, but also to also spend time with their siblings and to maintain two lines of communication—one with their parent and one with each sibling. She emphasizes the importance of keeping family ties up to date and strong, so that after parents have passed away sibling relationships will continue to thrive.

*The opinions in this article are those of the author.*