

How to Manage Sibling Conflict Over Care of Elderly Parents

Family dynamics can make caring for elderly parents more difficult. Learn how to resolve common issues that can arise between siblings.

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Key Takeaways

- It's not uncommon for siblings to disagree on how best to take care of an elderly parent and how the responsibilities should be divided.
- Thinking of your siblings and family unit as a team, rather than separate, adversarial parts may help alleviate some of this potential conflict.
- Opening up communication among your siblings and leveraging each sibling's individual strengths can help ease the burden of caregiving.
- Sharing tasks can help everyone feel included, respected and able to sustain their caregiving efforts for the long term.
- If you're concerned that a parent is being abused or neglected, contact your local Adult Protective Services organization for advice and support.

You may have a rosy picture of you and your siblings coming together to care for your aging parents when they start to need more help. But often, disagreements complicate these arrangements and can even tear families apart.

Denise M. Brown, author of “The Caregiving Guide” and founder of [CaringOurWay.com](#), expected her siblings to help care for their elderly parents, but one sister preferred to remain uninvolved. Her decision to opt out added a number of wrinkles for Brown and her other siblings – especially because that sister lived five minutes from their parents and was in the best position to help them.

Flexibility ended up being key for their situation, Brown recalls. The siblings who wanted to be involved communicated often and adapted to an evolving situation.

Here, experts share 10 tips for how best to manage potential conflicts with your siblings as you seek to provide supportive care for your elderly parents.

1. Accept That Issues Could Arise

Relationships can be sticky, and family dynamics can dredge up old hurts and traumas.

“It all just gets thrust in your face right at the time when [parents need care](#),” says Joy Loverde, Chicago-based author of “The Complete Eldercare Planner, 4th Edition” and founder of [elderindustry.com](#).

Each sibling has their own relationship with their parents that can be shaped by gender, birth order and history. When deciding which sibling will take care of the parent, daughters and eldest siblings often end up in charge.

“There tends to be someone who becomes the automatic project manager, and that person starts to stand guard and acts as the gatekeeper,” Loverde explains.

Having an obvious choice of sibling to lead can be both a blessing and a curse; in some cases, the roles flow naturally, and everyone works well together. But in other cases, the lead sibling might feel abandoned by their siblings during a parent’s illness. And the siblings who aren’t in charge might feel the lead sibling is manipulating their parents or the situation for their own interests. Either circumstance can get ugly fast, and getting everyone on the same page and working together isn’t always easy.

Communication and even a third-party mediator, however, can help ease some of the tension from potential conflicts. You’ll also want to avoid letting yourself get pulled back into long-standing – and often counterproductive – childhood roles.

Sometimes, sadly, real neglect and abuse might also be at work, and you may need to take legal action. In such cases, contact Adult Protective Services.

“Ensuring your parent’s safety is critical,” says Rochelle Koch, a behavioral health therapist with Providence in Orange County, California.

2. Engage in Ongoing Communication

Developing a structured communication strategy, whether it’s a group text thread or a regularly scheduled conference call, can keep everyone in the loop on their parents’ care. It easily eliminates or reduces second-guessing and miscommunication that might otherwise escalate into hurt feelings or intense conflict among siblings.

“During the last few years of my parents’ life, I would set up a conference call between me and my siblings that worked well,” Brown says. “That way, everybody heard what was happening at the same time, and there was no way to misinterpret.”

To keep check-ins productive, Roger Miller, a licensed clinical psychologist and neuropsychology team lead with Aviv Clinics in The Villages, Florida, suggests:

- Setting an agenda
- Focusing on the present
- Sharing all relevant information

- Avoiding unrelated issues
- Listening to and respecting everyone's opinions
- Giving everyone time to speak
- Including the parent in the decision-making process

If you're still struggling to get on the same page, "try not to jump to conclusions or make assumptions," Koch recommends, adding, "Start from a place of curiosity, ask questions and get clarity on that sibling's perspective and intentions."

Take breaks from the situation as needed, and be sure to "involve all siblings for transparency and focus on any specific examples of concerning behavior rather than making accusations that could escalate the situation," she points out.

3. Plan Ahead

The more information you have, the more productive your [conversations](#) can be and the more confident you can feel that you're making the best choices for your parents' care.

Start by gathering your parents' health information, including [advance directives](#). Next, determine who the appointed decision-makers will be for your parents' financial information and related [affairs](#).

Jenny Munro, a gerontologist at Home Instead, an Honor Company headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska, recommends discussing:

- What are your parents' wishes?
- Where will your parents live?
- What is your parents' financial situation?
- Which sibling will take the lead in managing care?
- What role(s) will other siblings play?
- What happens if one parent is diagnosed with [dementia](#), [Parkinson's disease](#) or [cancer](#)?

You should also start this process as early as possible.

"The last thing a family wants to do is have discussions like this in a crisis situation. Make the time. You will always be grateful you did," Munro says.

4. Give Each Other Grace

Accepting that an elderly parent is nearing the end of their life is difficult for anyone, and some siblings may find it more challenging than others. Be compassionate and patient with them.

"Everybody accepts the reality of the situation on their own timeline," Brown says. "My siblings who remained involved sometimes were a little slower to adjust to the reality."

Her younger sister, in particular, struggled to come to terms with what was happening.

"I gave her space to adjust at her own timeline, with her own process," Brown recalls, adding that she continued planning for the future in the meantime.

Loveverde says that thinking of your sibling group as a team can also help.

"It's about working together," she explains. "When we communicate with each other, the idea is not to necessarily agree, but to align with each other. Be a team, and work cohesively as a team would."

5. Play to Your Strengths: Determine Which Sibling Will Take Care of the Parent

Each sibling has their own life experiences and skill sets.

“It’s important to look at the strengths each sibling brings and then use that, knowing that your strengths are going to be different from your siblings’ strengths,” Brown says.

For example, if one sibling has a [caregiving](#) background or is a nurse, they might be best suited to handle the medical proxy role. Another sibling who has more experience or knowledge of finances or legal elements might be best suited to serve as [power of attorney](#).

It’s worth noting, however, that leveraging each sibling’s strengths doesn’t mean the burden will be equally divided.

“One sibling may have their own health issues to manage, or there may be a sibling who refuses to be involved,” Koch explains. “Some siblings may help in personal care more, while others focus on financial affairs. Everyone should contribute in a way that aligns with their capacity.”

Koch recommends creating a shared journal in the home or a document online to track tasks and accountability. That way you can see at a glance not only what needs to be done, but also what has been completed, while giving each sibling credit for their contribution.

6. Preserve the Sibling Relationship

The dynamics of your interpersonal relationships can be useful – or challenging – in caring for elderly parents. To maintain the sibling bond, you’ll need to be frank with your loved ones.

“Siblings really need to dig deeper and communicate what we want rather than have our sibling take a guess at it,” Loverde points out.

In Brown’s family, for instance, one of her siblings was less able to offer concrete assistance but was a wonderful companion who became a trusted sounding board.

“If I needed a complete [break from caregiving](#) and its stresses, she was the one I’d call,” Brown recalls. That sibling’s proximity to the situation meant she was fully informed and able to offer empathy and support without trying to alter the plan.

Brown’s sibling was also a great comfort to her parents, sitting with them for hours so they wouldn’t be alone. There are many different ways of loving and supporting your family members, and for some, that means simply showing up.

7. Get Outside Support

Tapping your network of friends as well as any resources in the community, such as your local Area Agency on Aging, a [geriatric care manager](#) or a social worker at a senior center, can be critical.

And don’t overlook other family members, Munro says. Perhaps older grandchildren can help with certain tasks, such as offering companionship or helping maintain the home and yard.

“It takes a village, and everyone needs to be open and honest on what they can and can’t do,” she adds.

8. Manage Emotions Carefully

Often, the more siblings there are in your family, the more challenging coordinating care can be.

“You’ll have differing personalities and reactions to what’s happening, different opinions on what should be done and different knowledge of what the options are,” says Charmaine Conaghan, owner and executive director of Always Best Care of Glenview and the North Shore in Glenview, Illinois.

The emotions of facing the decline of a parent can also make every decision feel more fraught. Finances, for instance, can be a flashpoint.

“Money is the greatest reason why families break up over parent care,” Conaghan says. “It’s taboo to talk about money, but you’ve got to talk about money and who’s going to pay for [long-term care](#).”

In some cases, differing opinions on the best course of action can lead to a meltdown in communication between siblings. In those situations, the best option may be to seek the assistance of an outside arbitrator (more on that below).

9. Get Professional Help

If you come to an impasse, get outside help.

10. Focus on the Present

Lastly, it’s important to recognize that most of us are doing our best with the information we have at the time. Caring for an elderly parent is a fluid situation, and it can lead to lots of self-doubt about whether you’re making the right decision. Try focusing on “right now.”

“Right now, you’ve made the best decision that you can. The next right now, you can change it,” Brown explains.

It’s also worth noting that not all families experience challenges, so there’s reason to hope you’ll be able to avoid the worst of such situations. Even in very large families, sometimes the pieces fall into place and all the siblings pitch in with their strengths in a meaningful way.

“It is possible for everyone to treat each other with respect and understand that everyone has the best interests of Mom and Dad in mind,” Conaghan says.

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