



PARENTING YOUR PARENT

A ROLE REVERSAL

With life changing, children struggle with the reversal of roles and the child becoming their parent's guardian. A logical plan of action is suggested here to deal with the challenges and struggles which come from taking in an elderly parent or needing to take over responsibility of your parent.

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In our fast paced modern world, the pressure is on to keep up and step up. This is a world of incredible inventions and great improvements in healthcare, but also a very unkind world to senior citizens. The generation gap, daily changes in technology and financial unpreparedness greatly affects those on pension and it is more often becoming the responsibility of children to take care of their parents. This is a great challenge to children, as roles become reversed and often they need to provide parenting to their parent.

Today, it is a stressful challenge to do basic things like shopping, going to the library and travelling on roads. Everything is fast, and the technology which drives the world challenges the older generation. Children who live near or with their parents soon become aware of the struggle which their aged family members experience. For children who live away from home or far from their parents, the reality of their hardships is often hidden. Parents don't feel comfortable confessing their struggles to their children. The reasons for this could include a fear of being packed off to an old age home, or becoming dependent on their children and becoming a burden.

The sad truth is that parents often struggle financially to make ends meet, but are too proud to ask their grown children for help. Children, who have been sheltered by their protective parents are not aware that their parents could be struggling; their parents seem so strong. It is often a shock when reality comes knocking and they realize that their parents have medical bills in arrears, are unable to go to shops and experience panic when they have to travel any distance.

WHY CHILDREN PARENT THEIR PARENT

Children often become responsible for making tough decisions for their parents such as choosing a care facility, or taking away a parent's car keys when they have become a danger on the roads alone. This can be emotionally draining for parent and child. It can be doubly taxing when their parent becomes an additional, often rebellious, child to them. Yet, it is something which we all will face despite being ill prepared.

With the change in family dynamics, it is becoming more prevalent today that one of the parents' children will remain in the family home. Either through necessity or due to relationship choices. With more people choosing to remain single and not having children, parents are sometimes fortunate to have a dependable guardian who can assist them in the form of a child still living at home.

This brings its own set of issues though. Parents will hide their true needs, demand that it is their home and that they make decisions and maintain the parent-child relationship. But, at some inevitable point in time, there comes a point of no return where the child has to step in and make some very difficult decisions for their aging parents.

It is an unavoidable reality that the human body fails. For some, this may only happen very late in life, but for others it is a daily happenstance. It is quite human to want to avoid this reality, to deny that we are losing senses or slowing down. Reflexes and reaction times slow, the brain also becomes a little less focussed and forgetfulness slips in through the clock of life. Deciding when it is time to take over from your parent and start making decisions for them is a tricky question.

Many pensioners experience stress and anxiety on a daily basis, yet believe that since they are on pension this is in their minds and they should just buck it up. Perhaps they fear that if they tell their children how stressed they are they will become a burden. There are sadly, many children who lock their parents away in old age homes where the conditions can be frightful. Only the very wealthy parent can afford to go to retirement villages where they live a measure of normalcy.

As child, it is your responsibility to take care of your parent. They took 18 years of their lives to raise and provide for you. It doesn't have to be a burden though. When the time comes to take over from your parent, or to take them in, consider these issues:

#1 Planning

It is not simply a matter of taking all authority or responsibility from your parent. Though you will become their safety net, they are not helpless. When considering your (and their) options, all the responsible parties should be consulted. Perhaps call a family meeting and keep written minutes so that everyone has a copy and knows what was decided and which responsibilities everyone in the family have. For example: if a parent is no longer able to manage living on their own and it is decided that they live with one of their children (perhaps due to financial reasons), the other children should commit to contributing monthly amounts to help with their parent's living costs and also schedule visit periods where they will take their parent in to give their sibling a break. Real promises should be made and kept. Decide on fixed amounts with an annual increase in the monthly monetary contributions. Specify what these contributions will be used for; clothing, food, medicine, travel expenses. Effective planning will ensure that everyone

knows where they stand and assure the parent that they can rely on being taken care of.

#2 Administration

With age, parents will become less able to do daily things like drawing money or safely driving themselves around town. It should be decided at a family meeting before taking these responsibilities away from the parent. Appeal to your parent's logical sense of planning. If they struggle to draw money or drive in peak time, then get them to promise that they will draw at a safe cash machine and only during a safe time when less people are there to put pressure on them. Arrange for them to only drive short distances and during low traffic times. Ensure that they can still get their shopping done, by setting a weekly time when you can take them to town. If you don't stay with or near your parent, but they aren't ready to move in with you; then, pay a responsible person to take this task and drive them once a week to places they need to go, but are afraid to drive to. Parents who have always cleaned and run their own home, will in all likelihood want to continue doing so for as many years as possible. Physically, they might not be able to and they will strain themselves to the point of exhaustion. As child it is your responsibility to step in and arrange for helpers like cleaners and gardeners to do the basic maintenance to help your parent. Don't be surprised if they rebel against this initiative though. Stick to your guns and make it clear that while they live alone, you will be assisting them in making some decisions. Remember that change is difficult to accept when you are older, but it will not be in their best interests to physically exhaust themselves and develop health issues.

#3 Money

Parents spoil their children. Many parents continue to give money as 'loans' or gifts to their adult children. Sometimes, children even borrow money from their parents, this can drain any pension which your parents may have kept as a nest egg. Children must STOP asking or accepting money from their parents. This is not love. Love is being independent and helping your parents, not the other way round. Children must step up, not eat away at the parent's remaining funds.

When the time comes that you need to take charge of your parent's finances, it needs to be done cautiously. Don't take away their rights. Help, don't dominate. They have a say in what happens to them. Acknowledge this, but also make it clear that you will protect them. At times, this might even be protection from themselves. Many pensioners have been scammed, or lost money due to criminals. When they withdraw large amounts of money, it is best to go with them. Card shopping is safer, but many pensioners prefer cash. Having a card declined is not only embarrassing to them, but highly stressful. Ensure that you are available when they need to go make a large purchase.

#4 Accommodation

When your parent begins to lose physical ability and the health train goes downhill, it might be necessary to start making final plans. This is when your parent will need you the most. Here they will deal with embarrassment on a daily basis. Adult nappies, pills, injections and bodily frailty are not something they are proud of, and they will not want their children to deal with this. Assure them that this is not a burden to you and that you are proud to help them. Many adult children will not be able to take care of their infirm parent. Perhaps the home set-up, in-laws and time constraints will necessitate that parents be moved to a high-care facility. This decision should not be one of convenience only. There are other options. You can employ the assistance of nurses or other health personnel to take care of daily tasks such as washing and dressing infirm parents while they are still living with you. It might be inconvenient to you, but your parent will greatly appreciate the fact that they can still share a home with their family and are not left to the mercy of strangers.

#5 Who's the boss

To many, the blending of a family by taking in their parents, is a very disruptive process. It can feel like you've been reduced to a teenager with your parent taking over. The last time you shared a home with your parent might have been when you were a teenager. To them, this is where they are picking up. By not acting like a teenager who demands respect you will be able to get them to mind shift. Have a meeting with your parent. Be reminded that they are feeling fragile and vulnerable as they might have had to give up their home and now have become dependent on you. Ensure that they still have responsibilities which make them feel valued and involved in the family. Involve them in daily tasks such as cooking, choosing plants for the garden or playing with the pets. Be careful not to abuse their willingness to work. They are not your personal chef or domestic worker, nor the nanny for your children. Do things with them, not to them. Firmly, talk to the family about boundaries. Everyone living in the home will need to know where they stand. Public areas are to be shared, but your parent also needs their privacy as much as you do. If you are lucky they will be able to live in a separate area like a granny flat or garden cottage at your home. Make it clear that you will respect their autonomy in their space and that they should do the same for you and your family. They do not have the right to interfere with your childrearing philosophies, just like you don't have the right to tell them off when they want to visit with you. Your parents will want to spend time with you. They also have social needs. Make time, remember, they don't have much time left. When they are gone, you will have to live with regrets.

Part of growing up, is taking over the mantle of responsibility from those who raised you. Responsibilities shift and we have to act accordingly. Perhaps it is revealing of the morals of society how we treat the aged and infirm. If we aren't prepared to sacrifice for our parents, who will sacrifice for us? With thorough planning and preparation, we can exchange roles in a responsible and sensitive manner. Taking care of your parent is not a burden. It is a privilege to be able to repay a parent's love when they need it. By not waiting till the end to step back into their lives, a child can have the opportunity to really know their parent and share in their wisdom. By showing your parent that you are a child they can be proud of, they will be able to take the final journey with less stress and anxiety, safe in the knowledge that they succeeded and are leaving a legacy in you.

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