

Struggles of adult children and aging parents

We all want the best for our parents. But in the process of trying to do what is best for them, adult children often need to honestly assess their own feelings. Each family is different but over the years I have identified two common situations in which adult children often find themselves. How they handle their own feelings and fears will impact how they can be of help to their parents.

Just as Mom and Dad may be struggling to consider moving from a home they have been in for 30, 40 or more years, their children can find it just as emotionally upsetting. The house can represent so many memories and significant moments for a family. At the same time, not all siblings may have the same emotional tie to the homestead. Families need to validate these feelings before a conversation about an actual move can go forward. You cannot help a parent face their fear of moving if you have not faced your own feelings first.

For other adult children, the primary difficulty they face is feeling uncomfortable with changing roles. We really do not become the parents of our parents; we will always be their children. Yet, it may feel that our parents are now looking to us for the answers. Most children feel sympathetic that their parents are undergoing a transition in life that can be emotional and challenging. If they are honest with themselves, they are in transition as well. We want our parents to remain the healthy, vigorous and in-charge person we've always known. Unfortunately that's not always possible.

And this is what a lot of our discussions center upon when working with older adults and their families... how to talk about change. How does this move, this

change, affect Mom and Dad and also the rest of the family? On many levels it can be equally traumatic for the adult children. I talk to children of older adults about the need to honor their parents' experience and validate their parents' fears before talking about moving. I encourage the children to do the same and take some time to reflect upon how they are feeling about this process.

What will it be like when Mom leaves your family home? Is there any mourning you need to address in that transition? If your parents have refused to talk about moving but can no longer manage on their own, are you avoiding the conflict? It is natural to not want to anger your Mom or Dad.

I was recently giving a talk to a group of adult children, discussing how to change the dialogue and better understand the fears their parents may be feeling. After hearing several audience members share stories of their parents' reluctance to move and the difficulty they were having getting Mom or Dad to accept the inevitable, a woman raised her hand and said, "I have to admit that I'm having as much difficulty with this transition as my mother is. I'm really struggling with the fact that I have to 'put' my mother in a place that she may not want to go. I feel like a horrible person and a bad child."

As this woman shared her heart-felt "confession" I saw a lot of other people in the audience shaking their heads in agreement. Though every family has their own dynamics, and every child has a unique relationship with their parents, there are some common threads that tie us all together. We will always be our parents' children. At any given

moment we can become that 8-year-old child who is trying to please their parent and gain their praise. But a moment later, in that same conversation, we may have to fill the role of advisor out of necessity. Honoring our parents means doing the right thing by them and it is not necessarily easy to do. If you're facing some challenging decisions with an aging parent, and you're having difficulty reconciling the process in your own mind, make time to sort through your own mental obstacles first. Recognize that your own ambivalence about change will most likely be communicated in some fashion to those around you whether you intend to or not. Start by being honest with yourself.

If you are struggling and are in need of further assistance, feel free to leave a comment or give me a call at 262-832-7113. I am happy to help.

This article is a reprint of a blog posted by Adele Lund, Laureate Group's Director of Community and Business Relations