

## **Expectations (Aging Parent)**

As adults approach their senior years many aspects of life (physical, social, financial, and employment) are changing. For most seniors, the retirement years are anticipated positively and with an expectation of more leisure time and a lessening of demands and responsibilities. Neither seniors nor their families are adequately prepared for the stresses that also accompany aging. The goal during the senior years then is to maximize the positive and develop strategies for coping with the stresses.

As with anything in life, the discrepancy between what one expects and what actually exists can be a set up for disappointment and frustration. It is therefore important to realistically look at changes which may occur and which may be experienced as losses from life as it was.

To begin with, the aging process brings physical change. Older adults may not feel or look as well as they did. There may be a general slowing down of activity level and cognitive speed. There are also specific losses – of vision, hearing, movement, and memory. Seniors can still do the same things but it can take longer. The changes though, can impact on mobility in terms of going places, driving and pursuing activities.

There are also changes in identity and roles, which accompany retirement. Many people's jobs typically define much of their identity. Retirement from a job can create a gap and affect self-esteem. It is also not uncommon that seniors are faced with necessary changes in their living situation. Health and safety issues may necessitate a move from a place that was home for many years. There is then a loss of the familiar, of neighbors, of possessions, of a place of worship, and so on. Transitions and losses associated with moving can echo and intensify earlier losses of friends and family through death or through their also moving away.

In addition to the role change that occurs with retirement from a job, gradually, over time, there is a role change that occurs with seniors vis-a-vis their children. Children of adult seniors may begin to take over responsibilities for finances, physical well being, getting places and so forth. Neither senior parents nor their adult children find this role reversal comfortable. For seniors, giving up decision-making and choice is an affront to their self-esteem. For adult children, it may be embarrassing and arouse anxiety to see their parent as dependant and vulnerable. It is a sensitive issue – to know how much to take over and what to leave in the province of a senior parent. For adult children there is also the challenge of balancing their own lives, families, careers and social needs with that of their aging parent. If not handled well, the issue can lead to tension frustration and conflict between adult children and their aging parent.

## **Statistics (Adult Children)**

According to an AARP survey, nearly 70 percent of adult children have not talked to their parents about issues related to aging. Some children avoid this most intimate of conversations because they believe their parents don't want to talk. Others think they know what their parents want. And some simply don't want to face the very real truth that if you are lucky enough to have parents who live well into their senior years, chances are good that disease, injury, frailty, even loneliness, will affect a parent's well-being. At the root appears to be a great fear. Parents, mothers especially, are the oldest thing we know about the world. When they begin to weaken, we begin to feel our own foundations tremble.

Faced with our parents' inevitable decline and mortality, we must choose then between causing pain by broaching unpleasant realities or conspiring in the dangerous illusion that everyone maintains good mental and physical health until the moment we draw our last breath. This conflict on a subconscious level can cause irritation and frustration, when it really has less to do with the aging parent and more to do with the adult child and their coping with how this life-change affects them.

As adult children are raising their own children, they look forward to the future of being responsible only for themselves and their spouse and the freedom this brings. Yet at about the time the children move out, the adult child is faced with their aging parent's needs, which can breed resentment. This carefree time of their life is no longer carefree.

It is also usually about this time that, as they are getting a sense of their parent aging, old wounds that have not been healed resurface. Tension rises among the siblings as they wrestle for control over who is being/should be responsible for their parent(s) and the old tally's that were once kept, are added onto breeding further resentment.

Statistics from a recent survey indicate that more than three-fourths (76 percent) of the 8,000 family caregivers who took an online caregiver stress test reported that their aging loved one's needs are overwhelming.

As more adults age well into their 80s and 90s, family members are taking on the role of caregiver. In fact, approximately 33.9 million people caring for someone 50 or older in the United States, according to a 2005 study by the AARP and the National Alliance for Caregiving. While the job has its rewards, new evidence reveals a disturbing trend of debilitating stress for the estimated one in four Americans sandwiched between raising their kids, and Mom and Dad.

Responses gathered through the Home Instead Senior Care site also showed that 91 percent of family caregivers have episodes of feeling anxious or irritable, 73 percent have disturbed sleep patterns, and 56 percent seem to become ill more frequently.

In less than 20 years, from 1975 to 1993, the number of Americans over 65 who live with their adult children declined by half, dropping from 18 percent to less than 10 percent. There are doubtless many reasons for this decrease, from the improved health of older Americans to the number of two-or-more-job households. Nevertheless, a third of the over-65 population live entirely alone. One might expect the older that people get – and thus the more help they need – the more likely they are to live with one of their children. Just the reverse is true. If you make it to 85, the odds of your living alone jump to one in two.