



Family Caregivers of British Columbia

Our Aging Parents

Issues Often Identified by Mid-Life Children of Aging Parents

The following is a list of issues that are commonly reported by mid-life children whose parents are aging. It is important to remember that not all families experience all these issues and not all mid-life children would say that these issues are problems they cannot cope with. It is also important to remember that mid-life men and women experience these issues in quite different ways, that is, they describe them differently and experience different feelings about them.

1. A shift in acquaintance often accompanies the increase in contact that is common between parents and their children as parents age. This increase (phone calls, letters, holiday contacts, frequent visits, or sharing accommodation) can result in the generations learning more about each other than they previously knew – or that they want to know – about each other's lives, marriages, health habits, vulnerabilities etc. How much is "o.k." to know about each other's daily life can be awkward to sort out.
2. A shift in dependency usually results when parents become frail and need assistance to maintain as much independence as possible. Because this often alters the "power base" within relationships it is a challenge for mid-life children to avoid feeling like they are "parenting their parents."
3. Finances become an issue when parents' resources are insufficient to cover daily living, health and housing expenses. Because so many experience difficulty talking about money, this important topic is often unattended until too late.
4. Stress related to competition and collision between roles is an issue for mid-life children especially mid-life daughters who are engaged in time and energy-consuming responsibilities related to parenting, housework, employment, maintaining social ties, and eldercare. In many marriages the wife is more involved with the husband's parents than he is; this can lead to conflict as his parents age and need assistance.
5. Powerful emotional reactions to the changes that accompany aging and frailty and to the demands of caregiving can surprise mid-life children, especially if they did not anticipate how the family would age. Emotions that cause the most alarm are guilt, resentment, sadness and anger.
6. Confrontation with one's own aging typically accompanies involvement with one's own parents. This projection into one's imagined own future can result in criticism about health care problems parents have and decisions they make as mid-life children hope they will age "better" than their parents.

7. Ignorance about the aging process can lead to difficulties judging whether a senior's behaviour is "normal" or cause for concern and to poor decision-making.
8. Ignorance about the workings of the health care system and community resources can result in inappropriate expectations from the "system", poor decision-making, time consuming run-around and inflated emotional states during crisis.
9. Lack of involvement from key support people, especially siblings, grandchildren and spouses can result in over-involvement and isolation of the caregiving family member. Although there are several family members available to participate in some aspect of eldercare/caregiving, often it is a mid-life daughter who assumes more than her share of responsibility. Equalizing the responsibility for caregiving and preventing the burnout of the over-involved person can be a difficult process once family members settle into predictable routines.
10. Grappling with unfinished business from the past can interfere with adult-to-adult relationships between parents and children, between caregiver and care receiver. Troublesome secrets, conflicts and unresolved pain from years past can demand attention through power struggles and hypersensitivity.
11. Difficulty settling limits on involvement is common, even for those who are comfortably assertive in other arenas. Unrealistic expectations, a strong sense of duty or loyalty, a commitment to caring and guilt can feed an inability to say no to demands and expectations of one's siblings, one's spouse, one's parents and the health care system.
12. A lack of planning for the future is common in many families. Too often important discussions are avoided because they are awkward, only to demand attention in the middle of a crisis. Typical topics that need discussion and planning include: housing needs as frailty increases, finances for changes in expenditures related to aging and compromised health, how caregiving will be carried out in the family, the senior's preferences re: heroic measures as well as dying, and death, after death rituals, power of attorney and distribution of effects.

Issues often identified by the older generation.

1. Threats to independence such as loss of a driver's license, dependency on others, health problems that compromise senses and mobility etc.
2. Threats to dignity such as embarrassing health problems, lack of financial resources, having to ask for assistance with daily living activities, having to accept help, being around others who do not respect elders, etc.
3. Personal safety within one's home, in public places, with one's caregiver(s).
4. Worry, inconvenience, expenses, and losses associated with health problems.
5. Financial management and concerns about having sufficient finances to get to the end of one's life.
6. Social isolation due to immobility, lack of transportation, compromised senses, living far away from others, loss of friends through death or illness, recent relocation, previous dependency on a spouse or caregiver who died, etc.

7. Meeting one's daily living needs when frail.
8. Grieving the loss of youth, health, life, independence, meaningful work etc and making peace with the past.
9. Preparing for one's own death.
10. Loss of power in decision-making about matters related to one's own life.
11. How to access affordable, appropriate housing and health care.
12. How to maintain or re-establish meaningful relationships with one's own family.

**Clarissa P. Green, Consulting and Counselling,
403 W 21st Ave., Vancouver, BC V5Y 2E6 (604) 874-6930.**

Bibliography

The following list offers a sample of some of the very useful reading material available to help mid-life children of aging parents understand their own and their parent's situations and reactions. Many libraries have bibliographies of books on aging and caregiving that you will also find helpful.

Anderson-Ellis, E. & Dryan, M. (1998). Aging Parents and You. New York: Master Media Ltd.

Becker, M.R. (1992). Last Touch: Preparing for a Parent's Death. Oakland, California: New Harbinger.

Bloomfield, H. (1983). Making Peace with Your Parents. New York: Random House

Browne, C. & Onzuka Anderson (1985). Our Aging Parents: A Practical Guide to Eldercare. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Buckman, R. (1988). I Don't Know What to Say: How to Help and Support Someone Who is Dying. Toronto: Key Porter Books.

Chapman, E.N. (1988). The Unfinished Business of Living: Helping Aging Parents Help Themselves. Los Altos: Crisp Productions.

Crichton, J. (1987). Age Care Source Book: A Source Guide for the Aging and Their Families. New York: Simon & Shuster.

Duda, D. (1987). Coming Home: A Guide for Dying at Home With Dignity. New York: Aurora Press

Edinberg, M. (1987) Talking With Your Parents. Boston: Shambhala Press.

Gruetzner, H. (1988). Alzheimer's: A Caregiver's Guide and Source Book. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Hooyman, N. & Lustbader, W. (1996). Taking Care: Supporting Older People & Their Families. New York: The Free Press.

Mace, N.L. & Rabins, P.V. (1981). The 36-Hour Day. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Myers, E. (1988). When Parents Die: A Guide for Adults. New York: Penguin Books.

Sommers, T. & Shields, L. (1987). Women Take Care: The Consequences of Caring in Today's Society. Gainesville, Florida: Triad Publishing Company.

van Brommel, H. (1989). Choices: For People Who Have a Terminal Illness, They're Families and Their Caregivers. Toronto: NC Press Limited.

Wilson, J. (1991). Housing Options for Older Canadians. Vancouver: Self Counsel Press.