Texas Agricultural Extension Service
The Texas A&M University System

L-2117
8-99

Brothers, Sisters and Aging Parents

Adult Children and Aging Parents Series

Assess Your Sibling Relationship

Adult sibling relationships are varied, ranging from love to detachment to hatred. Solidarity and rivalry coexist in many sibling relationships. Recognizing feelings and understanding how relationships with siblings developed in childhood and over time can help. Such understanding is essential, particularly when a parent's health or circumstances change and adult children must assist a parent or sibling.

People change over the years. Childhood images of a brother or sister may now be outdated. The youngest who was always thought to be too young to have anything to offer may not be recognized for abilities in adulthood. The child who shouldered greater responsibility when young may be viewed as the family decision maker.

If you and your siblings are still relating to each other as you did when you were children, your ways of relating may need to be reevaluated. Distorted perceptions form less effective relationships.

Finding answers to the following questions may explain your relationship with siblings:

- What were the roles assumed in childhood by each sibling? For example, who was "the strong one," "the favorite one," and so forth? Do your siblings still function in those roles today?
- How do you feel about your brothers or sisters? How did those feelings develop? Are they based primarily on childhood or adult experiences and contacts?
- What comes to mind when you think about each brother and sister? Are your perceptions accurate or are they outdated?
- How do you think each brother and sister perceives you? How accurate are their perceptions?
- How frequently do you and your siblings maintain contact through visits, telephone calls and letter writing?
- Have you and your brothers and sisters grown closer or further apart with age?
- Do you and your siblings take an interest in what each of you does?

Feelings about siblings may not always be positive. If relationships are poor, a parent's illness, need for relocation, or death, can further strain relationships. Questions may emerge such as "Who will provide care?" and "Why should I look after my mother when my sister was the favorite?" Sometimes siblings compete to do the most for the aged parent, quarrel over the best care arrangements, accuse each other of negligence, avoid responsibility, or challenge each other about the number of visits or phone calls made or the level of assistance given to a parent.

Adult children play a crucial role in helping aging parents. A relationship with a parent affects not only the helping process, but also one's relationship with brothers and sisters. Sibling closeness can make providing support easier. Sibling rivalry, on the other hand, can interfere with helping parents. During crises, brothers and sisters may draw closer together or old conflicts may erupt.

The sibling relationship lasts all one's life. Adult sibling relationships may become even more

significant as the divorce rate and one-parent families increase and family size declines.

This publication will explain the dynamics of sibling relationships and the influence of these relationships on aging parents.

Kinds of Sibling Bonds

Bank and Kahn in ***The Sibling Bond*** describe three kinds of sibling relationship:

- extreme loyalty;
- rivalry; and
- solidarity.

Extreme ***loyalty*** involves putting a sibling first—even above loyalty to spouse and children—and a willingness to make enormous sacrifices. Examples include taking a brother into one's home indefinitely or acting as a parent to a sister.

Such intense attachments usually develop in childhood when there is a collapse of the family, with the parents physically or psychologically unavailable. In an attempt to create a more stable environment, the children cling to each other. Excessive dependence on brothers or sisters could hinder development of individual identities or relationships with other people in adulthood.

Sibling ***rivalry*** begun in childhood may last into adulthood. Where sibling rivalry has been dominant, a person may become obsessed with comparing achievements or failures throughout life with the rivaled brother or sister.

Sibling ***solidarity***, a sense of cohesiveness and emotional closeness with brothers and sisters, increases with age for many people. As older people observe the aging and deaths of their parents and siblings, their sense of belonging may be threatened. They strengthen ties with remaining family members to preserve their sense of belonging to the family of their childhood, including their brothers and sisters. Persons who maintain the closest relationships with their siblings tend to be those who have never married.

Solidarity may not develop if there was no significant interaction with siblings early in life. Lack of closeness because of significant age differences between siblings or an unresolved conflict are examples of this.

Sibling bonds that have been weak or negative for years will often further weaken or disintegrate entirely following the death of the last parent. However, crisis does bring many siblings closer together. For some, a parent's illness or family crisis may be the first time one really learns to appreciate a brother or sister.

Relationships and Helping Parents

Your relationship with your brothers and sisters influences the help given to your aging parents. You may feel your brothers and sisters take over too much or that you are left out when they help your parents. Such feelings may come from past relationships with them. Communicate honestly with them. To help them understand your point of view, show interest in the planning process with brothers, sisters and parents. Take the initiative to let them know you are a part of the group and concerned with the parent's future.

For example: "Mary, I understand you and Jim are discussing selling the farm for Mom. I would like to talk with you about this and, generally, about plans for Mom's future. Why don't we call John, too, to meet with us?"

Brothers and sisters are more likely to understand your offer to help as a serious one if you can be specific. "I will be able to meet with all our family on Friday, Saturday or Sunday to discuss selling the farm and to discuss what I will be able and willing to do to help as Mom faces the future. I have some things in mind and would like to hear everyone's ideas, including Mom's."

On the other hand, you may feel your brothers and sisters are unconcerned or not dependable. You may feel it is difficult to make plans with your siblings about help for your parents. The family conference can help.

The Family Conference

A family conference can provide a forum for communications between family members. Siblings, spouses and other relatives who are concerned should be involved. All siblings should be given an opportunity to participate in making plans and providing support to an aging parent. One person may not be able to provide all the help a parent needs, nor contribute the variety of skills and resources needed.

No family member should be excluded because of distance, personality or limited resources. Include the brother or sister who is difficult or argumentative, who never visits or does not seem to care, as well as the brother or sister who pro-

vides emotional support. This prevents later arguments over the decisions made.

Older people should be involved in any decisions concerning their lives. Change produces anxiety, but not being involved in decisions about a change creates even more anxiety. Older people—even the very frail—need to maintain control over their lives. Most older people, including the less mentally alert person, can be involved in decision making to some degree. A person who is railroaded into a new situation usually makes a poor adjustment. Having control over our lives is important to most of us regardless of age.

It is important to discuss sensitive areas such as your own life—past, present and future—and fears that you have of not being able to help loved ones face painful situations. There may also be fears that family members will be in conflict and that relationships may worsen.

Good communication requires not only as much honesty and kindness as possible, but also skill. Some people have found "I messages" open up communication. "You messages" sound dictatorial and create defensiveness in others. With "I messages," the individual speaks from personal feelings.

An example of an "I message" is: "I am concerned about contributing my share. I want to do my part. I am also very concerned about helping my wife's dad at this crucial point in his life. Because he has just lost his wife and moved in with us, I fear we won't be able to make our situation with him succeed unless we can devote our time to him this year at least and give him time to adjust to her death."

An example of the less effective "You message" is: "You just don't understand our situation. If you had one older person already in the house with you, you wouldn't want to take on responsibility for another parent either."

Negotiating with brothers and sisters is often necessary in a family conference. Sharing vital information forms a basis for making decisions. This may mean sharing family secrets that would influence the decisions.

For example, you may have a troubled marriage, a family member on the verge of a breakdown, or some other major source of stress that requires most of your energy. Share this information so siblings can understand why the support you give must be limited.

Negotiations may be based on timing or taking turns. One year may be a particularly stressful time for a family, whereas another year might be relatively free of those stresses. Sharing personal information may reduce unrealistic expectations and judgments of other family members.

Sharing hidden feelings is another consideration in negotiations at the family conference. If one brother or sister has always had difficulty relating to the parent who needs help, bringing this out into the open may clear the way to finding the most workable solutions. Remember, there are many ways to help that do not directly rely on interpersonal relationships. Financial assistance may be offered, such as paying to hire someone to do heavy chores the parent is unable to accomplish alone, or paying for adult day care or respite services.

Assess Needs and Resources

The parent and the adult child need to listen to each other carefully as they identify needs. Otherwise, adult children may not readily appreciate concerns the elderly parents have with crime and safety, the difficulties of dealing with the red tape of government agencies or businesses, or with obtaining sufficient reading materials.

On the other hand, adult children may be overly concerned about home health care and personal care, which are low priority to the elderly person. Giving the parent time to consider a proposal for help often makes it easier for him or her to have a sense of control over life and to cooperate with implementing plans once a decision is made.

Determine the kind of assistance the parent wants and needs. Consider the kinds of help adult children can give that enrich the life of the parent. The range of services might include the following:

1. ***Services necessary for survival.***
   - Homemaking (meals, shopping, cleaning)
   - Maintenance (yard work, household repairs)
   - Income (money, food or goods)
   - Housing (adequate living quarters)
   - Personal care (bathing, dressing, moving about)
   - Home health care (at-home nursing care, giving medication, etc.)
2. ***Services to maintain social interaction or participation in the community.***
   - Transportation (getting to doctor, shopping, visiting)

- Social and recreational services (entertaining at home, going to special events)
- Psychological support (listening or discussing problems, giving warmth and affection)
- Spiritual services (helping the parent attend church)
- Bureaucratic mediation services (helping cut red tape)
- Reading materials to maintain realistic contact with the world (books, magazines)
- Protective services (installing safety devices, protection against burglars)

3. ***Services supporting personal growth.*** Encouragement in these areas is especially helpful for the parent who is healthy, young-at-heart, and interested in new things or moving in new directions.
   - Employment (finding a part-time job)
   - Career education (training for a new occupation)
   - Enrichment education that enables one to live a fuller life (learning new hobbies, special interests)

Once needs are identified, with the help of the parent, explore how they may best be met. Assess the resources of family members. Consider the willingness and special capabilities of brothers and sisters, as well as their family situations and interpersonal relationships.

Also consider blending resources within the family with those from outside the family. Community services, such as Meals on Wheels, can be a welcome supplement to family efforts and are often accepted by older people as one way to be a bit independent of the family. Because family members are often more familiar with the unique needs of the aging parent than are those outside the family, a family member should coordinate the resources of family and community. Determine who the coordinator will be.

Viewing caregiving as a shared responsibility, considering issues of fairness, and clarifying roles and behaviors can not only assist aging parents but also can enhance sibling relationships. Understanding creates an atmosphere in which more positive relationships can flourish among brothers and sisters.

Acknowledgment

Adapted with permission from materials originally prepared by Lou Isbell, state specialist, child and family development, University of Missouri-Columbia, and Vicki Schmall, gerontology specialist, Oregon State University, and published by the University of Missouri-Columbia, Extension Division, College of Home Economics.

Judith L. Warren

Extension Gerontology Specialist
The Texas A&M University System

Produced by Agricultural Communications, The Texas A&M University System
Extension publications can be found on the Web at: http://agpublications.tamu.edu

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Chester P. Fehlis, Deputy Director, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, The Texas A&M University System.

5M, Revision