



Building Positive Relationships

Adult Children and Aging Parents Series

Sue is a 57-year-old teacher, wife of an almost ready-to-retain husband, a mother of two married children, and daughter of an 89-year-old widowed mother who lives alone. Life has been full with marriage, career, the children and friends. She has not had a close relationship with her mother, and for 20 years they have had only occasional contact. Now, because of her mother's declining health, more frequent contact is required.

In facing increased interaction with her mother, Sue feels anxious. She wonders: Will there be more responsibility than I can handle? Will I be able to satisfy my mother's needs? How will my husband respond to my devoting increased time and effort to mother? Will renewed contact mean fighting again for my independence from my strong mother?

The decline of a parent's health, the death of one parent, or financial pressures often mean an aging parent will need more help from the family such as help with meals, cleaning, transportation or financial matters. Sue, like many adult children today, is confronted with decisions that will affect her life and her parent's life.

Close relationships help in decision making and ease the burdens of caregiving. Those adult children and parents who have positive feelings about each other, involving mutual assistance and affection, are better prepared to deal with the changes and difficulties of aging.

For other adult children, conflicts and unresolved issues from childhood and adolescence can mean continuing conflicts and negative feelings in later life. Being called upon to provide support for an aging parent can then be particularly difficult.

Feelings between the adult child and aging parent go back many years and run deep. There may be simultaneous feelings of closeness and conflict that complicate matters.

The purpose of this publication is to foster positive relationships and greater understanding between generations. Factors influencing relationships and steps both generations can take to enhance their relationships are discussed.

Attachment

The history of attachment between child and parent influences their relationship in mid- and later life. Attachment is an enduring emotional bond between two people. According to research on attachment bonds, intimate attachments are the center of a person's life. Attachment between parent and child begins before birth and provides comfort and security to the child.

A young child feels attachment primarily to his parents. Later, as he develops attachments with other people such as a spouse or other family member, he is not as dependent on the attachment to parents for comfort and security. The attach-

ment with parents changes over time; however, it remains important throughout adulthood. Feelings of closeness in the past influence the present relationship with parents.

Feelings of closeness to and affection for a parent are the most basic indicators of attachment. Feelings of attachment are more intense when a relationship is renewed or when there is threat of loss. For these reasons, Sue may experience more intense emotions when she begins to have more interaction with her mother. Attempts to maintain contact and communication with someone are called attachment behaviors; they are easier to observe than feelings. These behaviors may not always represent feelings of closeness, however.

Protective behaviors are also associated with attachment, and are seen when a child acts to protect a parent who is threatened. An adult child may react to a parent's illness by diligently monitoring the schedule for giving medicines to help the parent survive. The child may be striving to preserve the emotional bond with the parent.

Each individual has a unique relationship with his parent. Not all families have strong bonds of affection and real liking for one another that create emotional intimacy. Accepting this can prevent needless comparisons.

What Can You Do?

Assess the degree of closeness in your relationship. Ask yourself questions such as:

- How satisfying is my relationship with my mother/father? How close do I feel toward each parent? How well do I relate to my mother/father?
- To what extent do my mother/father and I enjoy spending time with each other? Is my comfort related to time? (For example, some children find only a few hours or days can be spent visiting a parent without tension or old conflicts erupting.)
- What interests do my parents and I share with each other? How much do we talk with each other about our concerns? About the future? About sensitive subjects such as death?

Identify areas of conflicts.

- To what extent do you now have conflicts with your mother/father?
- What are the areas of conflicts? To what degree are the conflicts "carry-overs" from childhood or early adulthood?

- Are conflicts caused by your parent's temperament, your personality, or both?
- How would you say you have contributed to each conflict? (We cannot change another person, but often there are things we can do—for example, improve the way we communicate or change the situation—that may reduce conflict.)

Answering these questions may not be easy. Unpleasant old or new feelings may emerge. However, look for new insights. Write down your feelings, impressions and insights. This may help you to determine actions that will enhance your relationship. What is one step that would be realistic and constructive in improving your relationship or reducing a conflict?

When an aging parent or adult child wishes to reconcile differences, there are several ways to go about it.

- Work through feelings, being as honest and open as you can. Things that hurt you in the past may be explained or acknowledged. Often feelings can change and relationships improve through this process. However, it takes a willingness to share feelings and insights. This can be a painful process sometimes.
- You may wish to ask a minister or counselor to assist you in the process of reconciliation to help you move the process along constructively.
- Sometimes, by giving yourselves a chance to know each other as you are today, appreciation for one another grows, old feelings and situations are put in perspective, and acceptance comes more easily.

Filial Maturity

Filial maturity is another factor influencing relationships. This refers to the adult child's ability to accept her parents as individuals—recognizing their personal needs and goals, and accepting imperfections and failings as well as positive qualities. It implies relating to and supporting aging parents in an adult way. To achieve filial maturity requires understanding, patience and self-acceptance.

Aging parents who are not also achieving reciprocal parental maturity limit the level of filial maturity adult children can attain. Parental maturity means parents also accept their children as

adults, forego condescending attitudes, and willingly accept help from the younger generation.

What Can You Do?

First, ask these revealing questions:

- Do my parents accept me as an adult with rights to my own opinions, values and lifestyle, even if these differ from theirs?
- Do I accept my parents as individuals, or am I judgmental of their choices and decisions?
- Do I interfere with and try to control their lives? Remember, filial maturity may require working through an old relationship and arriving at a new, more equitable relationship.

The following quote from the Family Service Association of America emphasizes the qualities of filial maturity: "If you feel that your parent has not accepted you or loved you, stop trying to make it happen, but begin to find new ways of accepting yourself, loving yourself and validating yourself as a human being. Finish any unfinished business with your parent. If you can, say 'I am sorry' and help make it easy for them to say 'I am sorry' to you. Accept them as human beings who happen to be your parents."

Balance your own needs and those of your parents without feeling overwhelmed or overpowered. Learn to express your feelings and wishes to your parents. Let parents share their feelings, wishes and concerns about aging and the future. Listening is one way to support the elderly parent. This emotional support may be as important as financial or physical care. Be physically involved by touching or embracing if this seems natural to you or your parent.

Take a preventative approach, especially with active parents. Help parents find a way to stay involved with life, to learn and grow to meet their own needs. This may prolong independence. Motivate them by giving emotional support and inspiration. Encourage them to have hopes, dreams, ambitions and new goals. Provide "back up" support as they try new things—travel, a new occupation or remarriage. Make it possible for parents in poor health to keep in touch with others. Bring the stimulation of the outside world to your ill parents by providing books, magazines or conversation. You might occasionally help prepare refreshments so that your parent can invite a small group of old friends for an evening together. In other words, encourage aging parents to care for themselves as much as possible. If they need a change of scene, rather than taking them some-

where, help them plan a trip or outing they can manage on their own. Buying a pair of comfortable walking shoes and encouraging daily walks for exercise, to the library or to the bus stop only a few blocks away, may be more helpful than furnishing transportation.

Knowledge of Aging

Adult children can be most effective in relating to and helping parents if they understand the changes taking place in the parent's life, how they feel about these changes, and the implication of these changes.

One of the most significant characteristics of aging is loss—loss of roles, health, independence, financial security, spouse and friends. Losses may be multiple or occur in such rapid succession that the person is not able to adjust to one loss before being confronted with another.

The way a parent responds to circumstances may affect the child's relationship with her. For example, if the parent complains excessively about losses and how little she sees her adult children, the adult child may feel overwhelmed or helpless to remedy the situation. He may stay away from the parent rather than listen to the complaints. Consequently, the parent may feel cut off from the adult child and suffer yet another loss, further straining the relationship.

Very aged parents may withdraw from painful reality to pleasant memories of the past, especially when denial has been the lifetime pattern for dealing with losses. Such withdrawal affects the extent to which the adult child is able to relate to the parent. On the other hand, the parent may need and want help but not permit the adult child to provide it because he wishes to remain independent regardless of the cost. It may even seem that the older person wants to detach from family members by not permitting closeness with the adult children.

What Can You Do?

You can learn about the aging process, common problems of older adults, and the effect of disease. Find out what your parent wants or needs. The adult child's and aging parent's perceptions sometimes differ. For example, most adult children view personal care (bathing and dressing) and home health care (at-home medical or health treatments or home nursing care) as most important, while parents view protection (guarding against crime, checks on daily health and security),

bureaucratic mediation (dealing with government agencies and businesses) and reading materials as most important.

Such differences can have practical consequences. If children disregard their parents' feelings about the help they need, or force services that a parent views as unimportant, the relationship may suffer. Both are likely to feel frustration and anger when it seems the other does not appreciate their views, their efforts, or their needs.

Try to understand reasons for different perceptions. They may reflect different values, communication problems, long-standing conflicts, or lack of sensitivity to one another. Closer contact and observation usually reveal the elderly person's true concerns. Remember, too, that as long as your parents are mentally competent, they have the right to make decisions affecting their own lives.

Elderly Parents Can Help Build Positive Relationships

What do elderly parents owe their children? What can they do to improve relationships with adult children as health declines and they need more assistance? If you are an aging parent:

- Learn about the developmental changes of middle age and the problems that adult children face today.

- Cooperate with adult children when help is needed.
- Make it as easy as possible for adult children to help. It may mean being more flexible to prevent frustration. For example, the fragile 95-year-old can permit people other than her exhausted 75-year-old daughter to do the household tasks, even if she prefers her daughter to do them rather than hire someone else.
- Accept help graciously. Rely on others and let them rely on you. This permits your adult child to grow to fullest maturity.
- Communicate openly. Build a climate in which feelings can be shared and solutions can be reached together.
- Share with adult children what it means to age. You may even help your adult children to accept their own aging.

Families that understand how dependence and individual needs change across the life span from infancy through old age create a climate for healthy interdependence and intergenerational strength. With interdependence, the old will not attempt to manipulate or control the behavior of the young, nor will the young attempt to take control of their parents or treat them as helpless. With mutual dependency, both the aging parent and the adult child can maintain self-esteem.

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