

9 Strategies to Stop Fighting With Your Siblings Over Senior Care

“When siblings squabble over who will care for Mom or Dad or refuse to help one another with caregiving tasks, the problem often isn’t about caregiving itself, but conflicts and power struggles that may have existed since childhood.”

Alexis Abramson, gerontologist and author of *The Caregiver’s Survival Handbook*.

Melissa Green had never been closer to her sister. Yet when their parents became ill, they needed to become carers together. Instead, they burrowed into their old roles in their family. Sound familiar? Read on for ways to avoid sibling rivalry over caring for your aging parents.

Green and her sister’s family roles looked like this: the ever helpful, younger sibling who lived two blocks away from Mom and Dad, and Green, the disappointing, psychologically and physically distant sister and daughter.

She felt guilty for being so removed from her family, but “no one asked me for anything,” recalls Green. Her sister was angry. “She thought, I shouldn’t have to tell you what to do. You should know,” says Green. “Here we were in the same situation forty years later. She wanted me to be there for her but we had never communicated that to begin with. I was still stuck in that old stuff.”

Author on aging Sally Abrahms says, “It can be difficult for families who have never gotten along to make decisions together, especially when there are multiple siblings with varying caregiving styles, beliefs and personalities. According to *MORE Magazine*, 40% of sibling carers wind up having serious conflict with one another. Watching our parents decline or become needy can make us more emotional, volatile and even irrational. There’s something else: it reminds us that we’re next in line.”

According to Abrahms there are a few Hot Button Issues!

Why the sibling strife?

1. Money and Finances

Who pays for what, how the money should be spent, expenses over caregiving, who handles finances if Mom and Dad are no longer able, and inheritance. Which sibling has an Enduring Power of Attorney? Has the family consulted a financial advisor who understands aged care, and the aged care system?

2. Inequities and Disparities

Is each sibling pulling his or her own weight (tasks, time and/or money)? Is the hometown child, or daughter, saddled with more responsibility and resentful of out-of-town siblings?

3. Living Arrangements

Should Dad stay in the family home or is it too isolating, unrealistic or unsafe? If not, where should he go?

4. Caregiving Arrangements

Live-in, live out or family help? Who will do it, oversee it, interview carers and dispense medication? Should technology be utilized to remind parents to take their medications and alert you if they don't?

5. Medical Decisions

Who makes sensitive decisions when there are differences of opinion about treatment and end of life? Once again, the Enduring Power of Attorney is important. Has the family considered a Do Not Resuscitate Order? This is a medical order to withhold cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) techniques in the event of a medical incident.

6. Family Possessions

Who gets what when a parent downsizes or moves or after a death?

7. Independence and Safety

Who will think about asking the parent to give up those car keys if it becomes necessary, and ensuring fall prevention, especially if the parent is living alone?

8. Take Action to Avoid Conflict

To head off conflict down the road, Abramson and her brother, who are close and want to remain that way, are already talking about their roles, even though their parents are still healthy. If they need help, Abramson, a gerontologist, will handle the lifestyle and emotional issues, while her brother, a physician, will be in charge of medical decisions. They both will take part in financial decisions.

9. Strategies for Better Cooperation

Abrahms says, "Just ask! Have your parents participate in decision-making, or at least weigh in, if it's realistic."

"Spell out your needs. Maybe a sibling should know what you need, but maybe they have no clue. Perhaps they think you don't want help."

"Keep everyone in the loop. There are now websites that let family members collect all the information in one place (from medical, to caregiving and tasks that need to get done) and log on any time. Convene regular family conferences, preferably in person, or otherwise via Skype or conference calls."

"Divvy up responsibilities according to each person's strengths. Let them choose what they want to tackle (paying bills online, communicating with the doctors or researching housing options)."

"Hold your tongue. How important is it if you and your brother don't do everything the same way? Unless it's a safety issue, button up!"

“Time Out! If an issue becomes contentious, take a break, collect and calm yourself, then address the topic at another time. Apologise if it’s warranted.”

“Vent appropriately. Visit a carer forum or website, learn how others have handled tough situations, call a friend, talk to an in-home care company, talk to clergy, or consider an aged care consultant. It’s where professionals help families untangle issues relating to aging parents and help all parties make decisions.”

“Don’t expect a miracle! If your sister was always selfish, she may not change. But that doesn’t mean you can’t try to get her to pitch in.”

“Be empathetic. Be understanding of your siblings’ circumstances, of your parents’ and of your own. It’s a stressful time for everyone.”