Caregiving: Sibling Issues

Caring for a loved one is a complex task that requires, countless decisions while juggling financial restraints, paperwork, planning, medical decisions, exhaustion, and emotional responses to each of these. Many siblings have trouble agreeing on one subject much less every subject. If the siblings have a good relationship before this process begins they have a better possibility of having a good relationship throughout the process.
If the relationship has always been strained then it's likely that caregiving may create even more issues.

The reality of caregiving is that the lion's share often falls on one sibling. The primary caregiver. How this comes about may not even be something that anyone has agreed to or chosen. It may happen due to proximity because you are the closest child and so you start by doing small things to help your parent and before you realize it, you are in the primary caregivers role. And if you are the primary caregiver it is very likely that you are going to feel that you are doing more than anyone else and that it's often not fair. You will be right! It won't be fair. And if you go into that role expecting it to be fair and everything to be even, then you will most likely come out at the end of the journey with bitterness and resentment and perhaps no relationship with your siblings. We've all seen this happen. If you are the secondary caregiver you may feel guilty or resentful because you didn't play as large a role in your parents care. You may be tempted to micromanage from afar and your attempts to help may be met with anger. Our goal for today is to hopefully give you some ideas of ways that you can avoid some of the pitfalls of sibling caregiving whether you are the primary or the secondary caregiver and help you finish your journeys with your relationships intact.

So let's look at some of the things that can set you up for failure and maybe by recognizing these challenges we can navigate these waters successfully. Recognize that old rivalries can rear

their heads when you are under the stress of caregiving. The roles that we assigned or recognized in our youth attributed to our siblings can become at the forefront of our thinking.

Childhood Roles and Labels

1. Bossy
2. Black Sheep
3. Martyr
4. Princess
5. Rebel
6. Control Freak
7. Baby
8. Responsible
9. Favorite

Even if these old roles are no longer true it's easy to assume that they still exist.
It's important to see your siblings in an adult light and realize that they may be much more competent than they were in your childhood. Give them a chance to step up to the plate and prove those old titles wrong.

As your parent or loved one ages you should suggest to your siblings a family meeting before you need to, and discuss what might be coming and how each of you feels about the roles and responsibilities that may be needed. Find out your parents wishes before you meet. They may have their own ideas that may not be what you expected. They may not want to live with their children so that thought may be off the table. They may have a goal of staying in their home as long as possible so that may be your initial focus. Include them in your planning. If there is strife initially I would suggest shielding them from this aspect of the meeting. They know all of their children very well so they may have already made provisions for these problems.

Sibling Meeting

1. Invite all siblings-don't assume that certain siblings live too far away or are uninterested
2. Choose a convenient time-video conference with siblings that can't be there so they have the opportunity to be included
3. Have an agenda-with line items from everyone so everyone's concerns are addressed
4. Address major topics-current health, cognitive limitations, living situation, upcoming move, daily needs, home care services, financial issues, medical issues, long term care and funeral desires and set the time for the next meeting.
5. Take notes-This will help everyone remember the others concerns and decisions
6. Keep your loved ones best interest first and foremost-don't lose sight of this
7. Be open to hearing others thoughts and fears-try standing in their shoes
8. Avoid minimizing others feelings-they have a perspective that needs to be heard
9. Be respectful of others opinions ideas and point of view-treat as you would treat non family
10. Be realistic about your family members and their capabilities-try to assign responsibilities based on each persons strengths. If they are a CPA and live 500 miles away, then they may be the best choice for taking care of your loved ones finances. The one who lives closest may not be the best one to handle the daily caregiving responsibilities. One may be able to financially contribute but can't be there often.
11. Recognize that each sibling has a different relationship with the parent- realize that this is a key component to understanding this complex dynamic. Each child has a very different history that will come into play. You all do not share the same relationship even though you have the same parents. The parents may have been very different with the first child than the last child.

12. Recognize your limitations-Sometimes knowing when to stop and accepting someone else for who they are is as important as trying to get them to engage. You may have a sibling who does not want to help at all and you must accept this hard news and move forward.
13. Set goals for productive solutions-be willing to compromise and or forgive instead of needing to "be right" or have your own way.
14. Discuss financial concerns-realize that this may be a hot button. Will your parents money support their desired wishes? Will the children need or be willing or able to contribute if necessary? Will the primary caregiver be given some sort of compensation? What are everyone's feelings about inheritance? Has the parent discussed their final plans and what will be left to each child? Is your loved ones will in place? Remember the money is not yours. It belongs to the parent and should be used for their care. This may be problem area depending on the siblings.
15. Bring in a mediator- or non partial person to help resolve issues. Possibly a social worker, geriatric care manager, psychologist, long time family friend or minister. Ask them to help you keep these meetings productive and non emotional as well as giving you a neutral perspective. People will often listen to someone like this rather than a sibling that they have always had issues with. To find a mediator contact the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers (caremanager.org) the area agency on aging (eldercare.gov) or the Association for Conflict Resolution (acrnet.org)

Once you've decided on everyone's roles and responsibilities, have meetings or updates as often as possible. Pray about the meetings beforehand. Ask that each sibling pray before the meeting for the others. Also ask them to pray daily for the loved one and the caregivers. This may help keep everyone focused on the loved ones needs rather than their own. Do not use sibling issues as an excuse to stop caring for your parent. This is not an

acceptable response or one that will bring you pride or community in the future. Stay involved and caring and work the problems towards a good solution.

Advice for the primary caregiver on dealing with siblings

1. Be realistic about what you can do- Set reasonable boundaries. Have another sibling monitor whether the responsibilities that were agreed upon by the non primary caregivers are being upheld.
2. Keep the other siblings informed about the care needed and provided-you might want to have a weekly email or daily online journal in between scheduled meetings.
3. Keep good financial records and use professionals if needed-CPA, keep receipts for things that are out of pocket expenses which should be reimbursed.
4. Ask for help and be specific- I need someone to take mom to the doctor next Friday at 2:00
5. Communicate with the others when you are calm and not overwhelmed-set aside a time when you are more peaceful and objective. Not in the heat of the battle. This can confuse expectations and send others running in the wrong direction or trying to help in a non helpful way.
6. Let your siblings know what might be coming up so they can try to pitch in more if possible- don't be a martyr. This leads to resentment. If you have something special scheduled include it in your meetings so the others may be able to help more.
7. Be willing to bring in more help as the situation may change. Look at other options that don't include more hours than you had anticipated or agreed to. Talk to your siblings about bringing on some others to help even if they cannot. You should not exhaust yourself so your parent begins to feel like a burden.
8. Don't criticize your siblings when they are providing help. Realize that no one is going to do everything the same way. Don't micromanage their efforts with your parent unless it is

derailing their health or happiness. Thank them for their willingness to jump in and help.

The primary caregiver needs to recognize that it's very likely they are going to feel under appreciated and overworked. Try to recognize that along with all the extra work and responsibilities can also come extra blessings.

Primary Caregiver Blessings

1. You will have precious memories of time spent with your loved one that the others won't
2. You will have a purpose daily that is challenging but also rewarding
3. You will always know that you did your best and gave it your all. The others may face guilt and regret for time they did not or couldn't spend with their loved one.

Most siblings will not be the primary caregiver. Due to distance or financial situations or perhaps just not being suited to the task they will fall into the job of being caregivers from afar or secondary caregivers.

Advice for Secondary Caregivers

1. Be supportive of the primary caregiver- you cannot imagine the amount of stress they are under and the tasks they are dealing with daily. They are on call 24/7.
2. Appreciate the sacrifice- give them praise and thanks often. A pat on the back means a lot.
3. Recognize that the primary caregiver is often a target for the loved ones wrath and frustrations- the parent is often most comfortable with the primary so they are the one that hears all the complaining and unhappiness. If you only come into town once or twice a year it's a treat for the parent so they are on

their best behavior. The primary rarely sees this special treatment. They can often feel unappreciated or mistreated.

4. Plan your trips with your primary in mind- Perhaps staying at a hotel so the primary doesn't need to prepare a room and provide meals. Try to give them as much time off while you are in town as possible. They rarely get a break.
5. Use your vacation to give the primary a true vacation- Take a week and arrange it during a time that the primary may have a special event, a wedding, cruise, anniversary trip. Take over all the duties so the primary can truly be off duty.
6. Don't give unsolicited advice when visiting-the primary is there every day and is deeply involved. Even well meaning advice can feel like criticism. Support the routines in place and realize they were designed with your loved ones desires and needs in mind. If your trips are filled with "helpful advice" you won't be a welcomed visitor for long. Ask how you can help and see what the primary says. If they are struggling in a certain area then putting your heads together to come up with a solution might be very helpful. If they are happy with a certain routine then respect it and leave it alone. Complement them on how well organized they are or how smoothly things are running.
7. Try to provide as much support as possible when you are not there. Doing bills online, doing research for medical or financial or VA issues. Finding local agencies to help layer support. Arranging appointments for repairs to the home or researching handymen.
8. Be kind to the primary-arrange a pedicure or massage for them as a treat. Send a gift card for their favorite restaurant so they can go to dinner with their family.
9. Spend as much time with your loved one as you can-you may feel guilty or cheated out of precious time and memories later on if you didn't do all that you wished you had. You may also feel jealous of the primary's role because they had so much time with the loved one. Don't romanticize this relationship after the loved one is gone. Realize that the primary gave up a great deal to do this job and it was often beyond difficult and

exhausting. Reach out to them and strengthen this relationship. Be grateful to them for what they were able to do. It had it's blessings but it also had a price. Don't forget that.

Everyone needs to remember when the journey is over for your loved one that you are still their family and you still represent them and need to continue to honor their memory. If you had a difficult journey with your siblings are you honoring your parents by fighting over issues that happened when they were alive? Your siblings hold your entire history and know you in a way that others may never fully understand. You continue to honor your father and mother by honoring and loving their other children. I believe this is the desire of every parent when they leave this world. For their kids to grow old together and share those memories of childhood. I'm not saying this is easy. I understand that many people have been put in terrible situations during the caregiving process. It may take you time and a great deal of prayer to arrive at forgiveness and reconciliation. I say these things to you with your well being in mind. Not because your siblings may be deserving or have ever asked for your forgiveness but because it will lighten your load in time and help your own journey. So practice forgiving and look to Christ's example as you consider your siblings. If you are are still on your journey with your parent then think about these things when you are making choices. Be kind and caring and considerate of each other. I believe you will be blessed by this decision.