

Old Age is Not For the Faint of Heart

By Leslie vanWinkle

Parent-child relationships are complex, to say the least. Your father may be critical, distant, or domineering. Your mother may make you feel guilty, embarrass you, or smother you. Long after we think we have outgrown our difficulties with our parents, a casual comment or a certain look can trigger old feelings.

When a parent becomes frail and dependent, it shifts the power between them and their children. This is the paradox of taking care of your parent. On one hand the prospect of seeing your parent beginning to fail makes you value that relationship more. On the other hand, you are so entangled that problems are unavoidable.

Your roles have irrevocably changed and both of you are asking, "Who is in charge?" As the power shifts from parent to child, issues regarding their health, finances, and housing can be complex and sometimes contentious.

One of the most difficult things facing both of you is the scientific fact that the brain actually changes as we age and the area that governs judgment becomes impaired. This means that the parent is actually losing their ability to make sound judgments. This makes the elderly susceptible to scams, and we see it when they make purchases or decisions that are out of character or that makes little sense.

In addition to losing their physical health, your parent may sense this slippage and feel frightened, diminished, angry, and resentful. This adds new emotions to an already challenging phase of their life.

Here are some things that you can do to create a new kind of relationship with your parent.

Set the stage for future changes

When it became clear that my mother was no longer safe living alone in her home, I moved in with her and stayed with her for five years. We enjoyed each other's company and had a playful relationship. While she was still able, we took a trip to Mexico and later we enjoyed a routine of dinner and television most nights.

She was smart and realized that things were changing, so we were able to discuss some of the things that we could expect. I took notes, and she added her ideas, and I kept that record, knowing I would need it later.

When later arrived, I got out the pages and showed them to her. “Remember when I first moved in three years ago? And we talked about the house? How big it was now that your five children are gone – well, not me. I came back. But remember we talked about how Dad always took care of the maintenance and furnace? We talked about how much it cost to run the house. Remember?”

That early conversation set the stage for a two-year, on-and-off discussion about the house. She could read her own words on the page and I showed her the numbers comparing her housing costs and her income. She concluded that it was probably time to move into a smaller place.

We used those years to research and discuss her options. Finally, she sold the house and moved into a retirement community nearby where she knew some of the residents. She had the same view from her window that she’d enjoyed in her big house. The money from the sale allowed her to maintain an equivalent level of comfort, plus the community had a full-time nursing staff, so she was never alone and her children felt assured of her care. I visited her often during the week, went shopping with her and drove her to appointment.

That first conversation did not put any pressure on her to sell the house. Instead it set the stage for an inevitable future change. This is something you can do at any time to get everyone into the loop regarding potential changes in finances, health, and housing. Plan your conversation. Do it with a neutral third party if you anticipate difficulties, but do it before it is urgent.

Help them retain their dignity

You can’t change your parent, but you can redefine your roles. You can allocate duties and responsibilities, so that both of you maintain your sanity and dignity. Attempt to view things through their eyes. Realize that your parent is likely frightened of the changes they are experiencing and probably angry about losses that those changes bring. Mostly, they fear losing their independence.

Still in your prime, you live at a faster pace than your parent does now. You may just want to get things handled. You may be tempted to assume control and begin to treat your parent like a helpless or dependent child. While you may need to take on some caretaking roles if the parent is frail, you can do it without robbing them of their choices and their dignity.

Think through what you want to accomplish. Let your parent make as many decisions as they can. You can do research and groundwork so that you can present the options in a way that leads them to making one decision over another, but whenever possible give them their voice. If the parent is developing dementia, you'll want to get help to learn specific ways of working with that condition.

Show them respect

When a parent becomes frail, they can turn to the caretaker more and more to help them with personal tasks. It is easy to lose respect for the individual when attending to the body's needs, so it is important to always honor the body as the vessel for our soul.

Help your parent maintain their identity. Listen to their preferences when choosing food or clothing. As the body ages it takes in less nourishment, so if you must monitor their food intake, do so in ways that are playful rather than dictatorial. Avoid humiliating them by pointing out that they have not finished their meal. This just reminds them that their body is losing ground. Instead, offer their favorite foods in small portions on favorite dishes and join in their meal, so they are not eating alone.

Also, we age our skin thins and we can become sensitive to the texture of clothing and the fit of shoes. Make sure their favorite garments are always clean, and purchase duplicate items for their comfort.

Speak to them as adult-to-adult. Address them by their given name or even by their professional title. Calling them "Sweetie" and "Honey" is dismissive and patronizing. Help them retain their sense of uniqueness and accomplishment. Their body may be failing, and their mind may be softening, but they are still entitled to their unique point of view. This is no time to argue.

Foster their independence

Observe what tasks your parent can do and avoid stealing those tasks, just because you can do them faster. If they have a ritual of collecting the mail and newspaper, preserve that ritual. If they take pride in cooking for the family, allow them their pride, even though their taste buds may have dulled.

Allow your parent extra time to complete their tasks. Avoid rushing them through their slow bathroom rituals before bed, even if you are in a hurry to get home yourself. Build in extra time to get them out of the door for an appointment.

Give them plenty of warning and reminders. Since aging eyes can lose their sharpness, it can be helpful to provide a calendar and clock with large numbers. And write reminder notes using a thick, black marker and leave them where they are seen easily and often.

Develop a shared sense of humor

Growing old is not for the faint of heart. It takes courage to endure old age. Acknowledge how difficult things are for your parent now, but keep the mood lighthearted. I remember, after we had watched a television show about sea life, my mother cracked a joke about how she was like that old sea turtle flapping through the ocean with just a couple of stubby fins. After that, whenever she was feeling rushed, she would say, "Slow down. My fins don't flap that fast."

And always be nice. Remember, you're next.