

# When caring can tear a family apart

Our advice columnist, Keren Smedley, looks at why making decisions about the care of our parents turns us back into squabbling children

**T**he notion of a perfectly happy, Walton-like family is the dream that we all grow up with, even if, in reality, we don't get along with our brothers and sisters as we're growing up. We imagine, and hope, that as adults our relationships will somehow magically improve. And often that is, indeed, the case, helped by the fact that we no longer have to live together!

But ask anyone who's in the position of caring for an elderly parent and you're more than likely to hear that this couldn't be further removed from their experience. Maria Williams, 49, a business manager from Barking, is one such woman. She has three children, all now in their teens and they get on well. But it isn't like that for her and her siblings. She's constantly arguing, she says, with her sister and brother. And the cause is their elderly mother, who lives alone and now needs some care.

"My sister thinks I'm hard and don't really care about our mother, and my brother just seems interested in the inheritance. We've got some serious decisions to make — for example, whether our mother goes into care or is looked after at home, how much care we believe she needs and so on. And we're a long way off."

## The 'sandwich generation'

According to the latest figures, there are currently 700,000 people in the UK with dementia, a statistic that will rise to 1.7 million by 2051. Research undertaken by ICM in February 2009 found that one in five adults regularly provide care and assistance for elderly parents and many also support them financially.

Children have always cared for older parents, but the landscape is changing. People are living so much longer than before, which means that an increasing number have dementia and need special care. For many, this burden often comes when they are still bringing up their own children and holding down a job. Then there's distance to add to the equation, as many adult children may have moved away from their hometown and only see their parents and siblings on rare occasions.

## Sibling stress

With all these added pressures, it's no wonder that tension occasionally leads to disagreement. For Marissa Evans, a 53-year-old bank clerk from Northampton, her father's second family have made the situation even more complicated.

She's struggling with making painful decisions about his care and what will happen to his possessions with stepsiblings she hardly knows, and with whom she has very little relationship. "My dad is now elderly and decisions have to be made. He'll need to go into sheltered accommodation and, eventually, full-time care. My brother and I are together on this. We don't want our family inheritance — all the things we grew up with — to vanish, but it seems there is no middle ground with this other

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family. They see everything as jointly belonging to our father and their mother and don't think that we should take the things that were originally ours. Our father wants an easy life, so is not willing to intervene."

## Thinking rationally — or not

Family matters raise strong emotions and, in the main, when we're dealing with them we operate from the non-rational part of our brain. We believe our siblings are somehow trying to prove they are better than us.

Jane Clark, 53, a solicitor from

Chelmsford, and her sister, Sue, for example, both want to be involved in their father's care and to be the most needed daughter. Subconsciously, they've regressed to their early, competitive years.

"My father frequently tells me what my sister's done and I immediately feel jealous and find myself trying to outdo her," admits Jane.

Once you understand what's happening in this scenario, there's a real chance of change (*see right*). It's also important to remember that your sibling relationships will continue after your parents' deaths. If you don't deal with your differences now, it makes it them harder to resolve later.





Negotiation is required when siblings have a parent who needs care

## A common bond

Bear in mind, too, that sibling relationships aren't automatically strained because of parental caring requirements. Take Marion Gold, a 61-year-old teacher from Leeds.

"When my mother became ill with Alzheimer's, it was a foregone conclusion that I'd deal with things as I've always been better organised than either of my sisters. I found it really hard to cope with my mother's mental demise but my middle sister, who'd tended to be sidelined in the past, came into her own. She took over and managed the situation while the rest of us were reeling. She set up the power of attorney and presented us with options for care and so on. It's transformed our relationships and it's strengthened us as a family."

## Negotiating difficult situations

Every one of us has had experience of having to make decisions with people with whom we don't see eye-to-eye and yet we manage to negotiate some sort of agreement. But that's usually in situations where we don't have emotional connections with the people we're negotiating with.

My own mother was diagnosed with vascular dementia in 1998 (she died recently, after a protracted illness). My sister and I both loved her and believed our only interest was her well-being. But, at times, you'd have been hard pushed to see it! We had very different perceptions of

how her last years should be managed.

So what did we do when the going got tough? We sought some help. We were fortunate to receive some excellent NHS support, including the Admiral Nursing Service. Its remit is to help people with the challenges — both emotional and practical — of being carers. We agreed to sit down and listen to each other away from our mother. But it was tough because what we really wanted to do was interrupt each other and disagree.

We were encouraged to look for a common goal, and surprise, surprise, we found one: our mum. We then moved into problem solving and began,

slowly, to find a way forward. We kept looking towards the future as best we could and eventually we managed to make the necessary decisions and help our mother to cope in the best way possible.

When things appear insoluble, it can be useful to have another

finding a solution. Marissa has enlisted her aunt and uncle to help her and her brother make a case to their stepsiblings, emphasising that it isn't the financial worth of the objects that interests them but their sentimental value. Both

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family member to "chair" the conversation. At other times, it can be a real advantage to have a professional mediator present. Maria is still trying to find a way to resolve her problems. She hopes to have further family meetings, with the intention of

because of my professional interest and my personal experience, I've developed a group and individual programme to help people negotiate this minefield\*.

● Keren Smedley [www.experiencematters.org.uk](http://www.experiencematters.org.uk)