

# The Art of Siblings

Therese Henman-Phillips, Caregiver Support Coordinator, Capital Region

There were no navigation charts for this journey. When my father became ill, as siblings, we rallied. There were definitely bumps, tension, strain and loss. Our new role as caregivers, quickly changed the sibling equilibrium established as adults. At times, I asked my mother why she didn't have more children, thinking the more bodies the better and at other times I thought some things would be easier if I was an only child, needing no opinions or consensus.

At CNS, we understand that caregivers are a special breed, but we also need to remember that not everyone is a caregiver, even those raised in the same family. Maybe your sibling has challenges themselves, physical or mental health issues, a young family or an extremely stressful job. Maybe they live out of province. These things are not going to change to support the current family crisis. Expecting that they will be able to equally contribute to the caregiving role is our first mistake. The division of labour isn't always fair.

The roles that define a caregiver however can be very broad. Are there roles where they can be useful? Don't assume because they are your siblings, that they have insight. Have a list of duties available and let them choose something that they can be successful at. Be clear on expectations.

Family communication is vital. Communication is important to convey the direction of care, to assess whether or not everyone is on the same page, to convey why certain supports are needed and to ask for help with specific tasks. With today's technology, it is very easy to set up some methods. Hopefully consensus can be reached, but sometimes, due to either trust that has been imparted, availability or an assigned legal role, someone is ultimately leading the decision making. It is still important to keep everyone informed. Making everyone feel part of the team can encourage ongoing respect and future participation.

Caregiving is a highly emotional role and we all have a unique family history as siblings. Keep in mind that your parents may be struggling as well with memory issues and conveying things differently to each adult child. Don't involve others in the conflicts that may occur by playing siblings off against the other or parents. You need to guard against those negative emotions that can alter relationships and could remain strained long past the end of your caregiving role. Try to start each day with a clean slate. A coworker's favorite saying-QTIP- "quit taking it personally". A lot of what is happening in some situations, is unique to the demands of caregiving.

As good as you are in your caregiving role, don't expect everyone in your family to be like you. "Good enough" verses optimal is ok. I know that's hard to hear when parents are involved. If you are feeling overburdened, the onus is on you to care for yourself. If upset by the lack of equality, take a step back, calm yourself and look at other ways things can be accomplished with the use of outside support or other resources. You have to remember this is also affecting your

own family responsibilities and those dynamics may exist long after the role has ended.

Caregiving can be very life enriching but when the challenges become too difficult for families, there are resources that can help siblings sort through the storm - support groups, mediation and senior care consultants to name a few. Many families find it useful to have someone look at the situation with fresh eyes.

If you are a sibling that is limited in the role you are able to support, make sure to acknowledge those who are taking on the bulk of the workload. A simple thank you or small gesture can go a long way to making your siblings feel appreciated. Acknowledging sacrifice is important.

Most of all on our sibling journey, keep compassion in your hearts. It is always the best anchor in stormy seas and the best chance at preserving those enduring sibling relationships.

