

Fact Sheet



Family Life Month Packet 1999
 Family and Consumer Sciences
 Campbell Hall
 1787 Neil Avenue
 Columbus, Ohio 43210

Strong Families ... Strong Futures

Guilt and Making Decisions: Role of Adult Children in Assisting Parents

Lynda K. Fowler
 Extension Agent, Family and Consumer Sciences
 Crawford County

Do older parents today have little contact with their adult children? Do older parents today receive little assistance from their children? Do adult children take over the role of providing for parents while parents relinquish their role of providing support to adult children? The answer to all three of these questions is "no." In families today, aging parents and their children remain very involved with one another throughout life. Parents value relationships with their adult children. There is much intergenerational exchange and assistance between older parents and their adult children, and this flow of assistance goes in both directions, from parent to adult child and from adult child to parent.

As parents age, adult children find themselves in the role of helping their aging parents in making decisions. Some of these decisions may involve a change in the parent's living arrangements, daily activities, personal and health care, and financial resources. Roles that an adult child might assume in the decision-making process include: giving advice and information, listening, offering support, and making decisions. Adult children who are providing care to a family member may feel guilt, a sense of responsibility, or remorse.

Feelings of Guilt

Adult children may feel guilty as caregivers of parents because of beliefs valued throughout life:

- It is selfish to put my own needs ahead of those of others.
- No one can care for my parent as well as I.
- I must do it all and make everyone happy.

A result of feeling guilty in the process of assisting parents with caregiving and decisions is that the adult child may experience depression and a lack of energy. They may feel insecure in solving problems and become overprotective.

Communication Supports Joint Decision-Making

Mims (1998) explains that the route sometimes taken by adult children is simply to make decisions for their parents. This is the "quick and easy" approach for the present, but can create problems in the future. It is better for the adult parents and children to practice "joint decision-making." This is a process in which communication plays a key role in determining the outcome. It takes time for both parents and children to get information, explore options, and consider the consequences of choices. As long as older parents are capable of making their own decisions, it is important to allow them to act.

Some communication strategies that support joint decision-making include:

- Be sensitive to the changes in parent's abilities and circumstances over time. Your role is to strengthen

your parent's capabilities by effective support. Your degree of involvement may vary over time.

- Listen and respect the views of parents. Differences of opinion will occur. Different personal attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs can lead to different reactions to the same situation. Try to understand your parent's point of view.
- You have more influence than authority with parents. Encourage and allow them to make their own decisions.
- Let go. Remember that parents are like you and your own children—they resent being told what to do.
- Be sensitive to your parents' fears of helplessness and changes in health and abilities. Give them your support, not interference.
- Use logic, resources, warmth, and sincerity. Parents will appreciate these qualities.

Adult children who assist parents with decisions must recognize that parents are ultimately responsible for their own lives. As long as they are mentally and emotionally capable of making their own decisions, they should be encouraged to do so.

References

Brody, E. (1995). Prospects for family caregiving: Response to change, continuity and diversity, In R. A. Kane and J. D. Penrod (Eds.), *Family caregiving in an aging society: Policy perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Karr, K. (1992). *How caregivers can effectively deal with stress*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.

Mims, K. B. (1998). *Aging parents and decision making: Role of adult children*. Family Information Services, Minneapolis, MN.

For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Life web site at:
<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/index.htm>

All educational programs conducted by Ohio State University Extension are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, creed, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, gender, age, disability or Vietnam-era veteran status.

Keith L. Smith, Associate Vice President for Ag. Adm. and Director, OSU Extension
 TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868