



# AGING PARENTS: YOUR CHANGING RELATIONSHIP

The relationships between adults and their parents can be complicated, and they usually don't get simpler as your parents age. These are people you depended on and looked up to as a child and probably pulled away from and recognized flaws in as an adolescent. As an adult, your relationship with your parents can be a confusing mix of love, attachment, dependence, resentment, and hurt—on both sides.

As your parents age, you can be pulled back into their orbit in ways that can be wonderful or uncomfortable, and often both. You've gained competence, independence, and emotional maturity. You've probably established your own life, separate from theirs, perhaps with children of your own. If you notice your parents losing abilities with age or illness, you may worry about where this changing relationship is going.

How should you respond? How can you engage with each other while maintaining the mature and independent versions of yourselves that you've worked so hard to establish? What do you want this changing relationship with your parent to be, and what expectations are realistic? What might your parent want or need from you? These are the kinds of tough questions that adult children and their parents can wrestle with, especially as a parent grows older and begins to need help. The answers will depend on who you are, your history together, and the needs of other people in your lives.

**Here are some suggestions for avoiding common missteps and problems at this stage of family life and making the most of your changing relationship with your parent:**

## **ENCOURAGE YOUR PARENTS' CONTINUING INDEPENDENCE.**

While it might be tempting to take over tasks that you could do more easily than your parent, think twice before you do. Instead, help your parents retain as much control over their lives as possible by encouraging and making it possible for them to do things for themselves. Yes, you could give your parent a ride to the library or the bus stop, but if it's only a few blocks away, it might be better to help them get comfortable walking shoes. Don't do things for your parents that they can and should do for themselves. That only adds to your burden while narrowing their world and making them more dependent.

## **YOUR ROLES ARE CHANGING BUT THEY AREN'T REVERSING.**

You are not becoming the parent, and your parent is not becoming the child. That attitude could lead you to adopt controlling behaviors that will be frustrating for you and both unhelpful and aggravating for your parent. Your parents are adults and deserve to be treated as such, no matter how infirm or needy they may become.

## **BEGIN AND END WITH RESPECT.**

When you offer to help your aging parents, do it with respect. Respect their rights and wishes. Unless they've been judged legally incompetent, don't make decisions for them. Consult with them and encourage them, but don't try to control or force them. Give them time to consider your offers of help or your suggestions for change.

## **PUT YOURSELF IN YOUR PARENTS' SHOES.**

You can't know what it's like to be an older person, but you can try to understand your parents' perspectives. Recognize that they probably see things differently than you do. Your concerns about their health or their changing abilities might be felt by them as a critical assessment or judgment. They probably want you to care, but they may not want you to help, and they almost certainly don't want to be considered incompetent.

## **ACCEPT YOUR PARENTS FOR WHO THEY ARE.**

Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, and that includes your parents. Let go of your idealized concept of who you want them to be. If that person hasn't shown themselves by now, chances are they never will. It can be painful to let go of unrealistic hopes for the parents you'd like them to be, but your relationship with them will be painful until you do. Accept and work with what you have. Get to know your parents better by asking about their past, what matters to them, what hopes they had when they were younger, and what hopes they have now.

## **SHOW YOUR PARENTS YOUR BEST ADULT SELF.**

It can be easy to slip back into childhood roles and behaviors when you're with the family of your childhood. If those roles and behaviors don't match with the emotionally mature adult you've become, notice what's happening and pull yourself back to your best self. You can't control how your parents and other family members talk and behave, but you can choose how you react. Choose to respond calmly, or not respond at all, to comments that are hurtful or likely to lead to an argument.

## **WORK TO UNDERSTAND THE SOURCES OF YOUR IRRITATION OR AGGRAVATION.**

It's often the case that what bothers you about another person is partly inside yourself. When engaging with your parents, old wounds from childhood can cause otherwise inoffensive comments or requests to trigger strong negative emotions. It might be galling to have a parent ask for help when they weren't much help to you. Fear of losing the anchor of a parent you've depended on might cause you to resent signs of their diminishing capabilities. With care, you might be able to discuss feelings like these with your parent in an attempt to resolve an issue that's affecting your relationship, but it's usually better to explore them with a friend or therapist.



**A professional counselor from your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help you process these challenges and provide coping skills to handle these changes.**