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Family Relationships in Later Life¹

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The Importance of Families

The family is as important in later life as during childhood. It is an important support group that creates joy and a sense of belonging through shared time together and expressions of love and affection. The family also provides assistance, such as financial support or help with chores, through all life's changes. The quality of family relationships is established in the early years of marriage and parenthood and carries over into the later years. Older people with healthy marriages and positive relationships with their children enjoy their family life in the later years.

The elderly who have strong family relationships often feel they can turn to family members for assistance when needed. As older people experience losses in life, such as the death of close friends or a spouse and changes in health or mobility, they may reach out to family for support. Time with family, help with chores and business, and expressions of love become even more important as the elderly adjust to major changes in their lives.

Marriages in Later Life

There are many opportunities for older married couples to enjoy their lives together and to grow closer. For example, the experiences of retirement and increased travel and leisure time may be richer if shared. In addition, spouses provide extraordinary companionship and support when health and mobility decline and a partner needs assistance.

Married couples with vital relationships are most likely to experience continued, positive interactions within marriage. Those who enjoy spending time together and can confide in each other usually maintain a close and giving relationship as they age. However, those couples who are unsatisfied in the earlier years of their marriage tend to have a negative experience in later life. Their relationships are difficult, their communication conflictual and unrewarding.

Retirement

Many couples assume that once a spouse retires, their marriages will be happier and they will have greater freedom to pursue their dreams. However, retirement does not necessarily bring about an increase in marital satisfaction. Happiness in

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retirement depends on the level of mutual caring and *support* in the marriage. For example, spouses who care deeply about each other and show they care are probably best equipped to adjust to leaving work and to spending more time with one another.

Although some couples experience a "honeymoon phase" shortly after retirement, eventually they go back to established patterns of interacting. For example, although couples may intend to share housework more after retirement, the patterns that were established early in marriage continue. Older wives maintain responsibility for cooking meals, washing dishes and clothes, cleaning the house, and writing letters. Older husbands maintain responsibility for yard work, car maintenance, and home repairs. Although husbands may increase their time in housework somewhat, women remain primarily responsible, despite the best of intentions.

Significant changes in spending patterns and expenses do occur. The most common sources of retirement income are pensions, profit-sharing plans, social security, savings, investments, and income from employment. Most living expenses are reduced, such as clothing purchases and work expenses, and most retired couples can live on 65 to 80 percent of their pre-retirement income. However, some expenses, such as the cost of health insurance and life insurance, may increase if the employer has been paying a part. Medical expenses also increase with age, and are a source of worry for many aging families.

Health

Satisfaction with the marital relationship probably depends more on changes in health than on retirement. If a spouse develops a serious illness or disability, the couple faces new demands, such as coping with reduced energy or mobility, reduced financial resources, and changes in the marital relationship. When a husband is incapacitated, the woman assumes responsibility for additional tasks, but this has little effect on her overall work load. When the wife is disabled, however, the husband has lost the household manager, and all domestic tasks must be reorganized. Thus, illness, rather than

retirement, alters the ways in which husbands and wives have traditionally divided their responsibilities.

In addition, physical or mental impairment places new demands on the caregiver and the marriage. Emotional stress, physical fatigue, and financial strain are common difficulties associated with caring for a spouse at home. Nevertheless, husbands and wives accept the responsibility for caregiving when necessary, deal positively with the demands, are prepared to provide care for long periods of time, and report high levels of marital adjustment.

Widowhood

Widowhood brings about many changes in finances, physical and emotional health, and social support. These changes often last years after the death of a spouse. Becoming widowed usually means a significant decline in income. Over time, however, the financial situation usually levels off or improves, especially for the middle-aged and remarried.

Physical and emotional health are often affected by the loss of a spouse. Recently widowed persons report more health problems than those who are married. They also show symptoms that are characteristic of depression, such as sadness, tearfulness, insomnia, and appetite and weight loss. Men and women experience similar emotional difficulties after the death of a spouse. As time progresses, however, they adjust and the negative effects of the loss decrease.

Social contacts are an important resource because they provide support that is helpful in the widow's or widower's adjustment. Also, social contacts with friends, as well as good health and participation in recreation, are associated with feelings of well-being among the widowed. Immediately after a spouse's death, there is a particular need for the emotional support of other widowed persons. As time goes on, the widowed are more likely to turn to their children, as well as to friends and other relatives, for support.

Widows and widowers tend to continue the social patterns they established in marriage. Women

are more likely than men to talk with friends and close relatives and to turn to their children in times of crisis, and this pattern continues in widowhood. On the whole, widows seem to have more vibrant social networks than widowers. However, both men and women experience continued and frequent contact with friends and family members. In general men and women experience similar physical and emotional difficulties with widowhood. With time, they learn to cope with the loss of the spouse.

Divorce and Remarriage

Divorce at any time in life can be painful. It tears apart an intimate relationship that has been developed over a number of years, thrusts the person into a new and independent lifestyle, and results in dramatic changes in even the simplest of daily routines. For the elderly, divorce is the ending of many years of marriage, and the adjustment process can be particularly difficult. Divorced older persons tend to have difficulty accepting themselves, and are pessimistic about the future.

Some studies show that later life divorce affects social support networks. Divorce reduces an older person's social contacts and may result in social isolation. While divorced women maintain their family ties, divorced men seem to remove themselves from both family and friends.

Divorced persons experience financial changes that limit their lifestyles throughout the older years. Divorced men and women tend to have lower incomes than married couples, and are less able to help their children financially.

Despite these difficulties, divorce can create new opportunities for growth and change. Like all divorcing people, the older person goes through an adjustment process. If positive adjustments to divorce are to be made, individuals must terminate their emotional bonds, establish a new identity, and develop daily routines that do not involve the former spouse.

Starting to date following divorce or widowhood may be helpful and satisfying. Dating provides an opportunity for long-term intimacy and companionship, and guards against loneliness in the

later years. Remarriage is less likely as a person ages, but some middle-aged and older people do remarry after divorce or the death of a spouse. These relationships can be caring and supportive long into old age, and provide additional financial stability. However, remarried couples can expect to go through a period of adjustment to living with a new spouse. They must become accustomed to each other's habits, routines, and ways of expressing themselves, as well as develop a new identity as a married couple. Also, the history of the previous marriage will influence the newly married couple. The memories and experiences of the past will continue to be felt in the communication patterns, daily routines, and anniversaries and rituals of the new marriage.

Parent-Child Relationships

In old age, parents want most to have caring, *sharing* ties with their family. They place a high value on a give and take with their children. They view their children as friends, and continue to be interested in their activities and welfare.

We sometimes think of older people as *needing* help or attention from younger family members, such as transportation, home repairs, shopping, or a listening ear. In fact, *giving* is an enduring part of the parental role — parents continue to provide, as well as to receive support. This ability to give to their children has a positive impact on the older parent's own well-being. Parents enjoy feeling needed and loved, and they are flattered when asked for advice. Those who feel competent as a parent and have open, affectionate communication with their children, feel good about themselves.

Contrary to popular beliefs and stereotypes, the elderly are not abandoned by family members. Most surveys find that from one-half to three-fourths of older parents maintain face-to-face contact with their adult children once a week or at least several times a month. Even when parents live some distance from their children, they stay in touch, and older parents are usually satisfied with their family relationships. It is important to recognize that parenthood is no longer the primary source of identity for older adults. As children have become independent, parents have also reorganized their lives. Parents and children are able

to have regular contact with each other while maintaining their own activities and identities.

There are no clear-cut rules for how older parents and their adult children should act with each other. For the first time, adults are living well into old age, and it is not unusual for families to be composed of four generations. Parents and children are sometimes uncertain about what to expect from each other, and there are few role models for how they should behave in middle-age and later life.

Parents are concerned about how to negotiate the time they would like with their children without interfering in their children's lives. Parents wonder how to discuss what they would like done for long-term care arrangements, medical emergencies, funeral arrangements, and disposition of their property after death. At the same time, children may feel more protective of their parents than in the past.

When an adult child is a caregiver, the relationship between parent and child changes. Often, the child becomes increasingly responsible for daily activities such as feeding, toileting, and bathing. Some adult children believe that in the caregiving relationship a role reversal occurs, with the child taking over decision-making for the parent. In contrast, parents seem to view this as a trade-off rather than a reversal. They have had to give up some decision-making authority to receive the caregiving they need.

Most experts agree that in healthy parent-child relationships, role reversal does not take place. The parent is *always* the parent — the one who gave birth, taught the child right from wrong, loved him or her, and watched him or her go through the many phases of adult development.

However, a role *shift* does take place when a parent is very frail or has severe problems with cognitive functioning, and the adult child becomes a caregiver. In these situations, adult children carry out some of the same *activities* as a parent. This does not change the fact that the elder has a long history of providing care and a deep understanding of the adult child's personality, problems and successes, and life changes. The elder also has years of living and learning that are not erased when caregiving begins.

Even though a parent may need to relinquish some duties, there are other ways for them to continue to express their support and to feel their worth. For example, a parent could continue to offer advice and wisdom gained from many years of experience and study. Also, to preserve the older person's integrity and independence, caregivers should encourage the elder to make his or her own decisions as much as possible.

Throughout life, a give-and-take across *all* the generations is a sign of family well-being. Older parents can continue to provide care for their children and their grandchildren until they are no longer able. Middle-aged children do receive love and aid from their parents and can also help their parents as needed. Grandchildren and children both give to and receive from the older generations.

Grandparenthood

About three-fourths of older persons in the U.S. are grandparents, and about half are great-grandparents. Although most grandparents are in their mid-fifties, grandparenthood may begin in the thirties, forties, or fifties.

Becoming a grandparent is usually a positive experience. For example, the bonds between mothers and daughters are usually strengthened as they share the experiences and activities of parenthood. Grandparenthood can be a source of fulfillment and happiness because it gives older adults a meaningful role in maintaining family stability, traditions and values, and a joyous chance to relive life and to indulge grandchildren.

Due to the frequency of divorce and remarriage in their children's generation, many older adults wonder if and how they will continue their relationships with their grandchildren. Research shows that grandparents tend to have continued contact with their grandchildren when their adult child has custody of her or his children. Because a mother is usually awarded custody of children after divorce, her parents often find it easier to see their grandchildren than the parents of the children's father. Also, if the grandchildren live near the grandparent, they are able to continue their

relationship more easily than those who live at a distance.

Grandparents need not assume that when their adult child divorces they will lose their grandchildren. Surprisingly, the extended family network may actually *increase* for grandparents after divorce. Sons or daughters may remarry and have a child, and grandparents often continue to have contact with their former son-in-law or daughter-in-law and their children. However, grandparents should be prepared to work at maintaining a relationship, especially if they are the parents of a divorcing son or if their grandchildren do not live nearby.

Sibling Relationships

Most older adults have at least one living brother or sister, and many have contact on a weekly or monthly basis, particularly if they live near each other. For older adults, relationships between siblings are unique and important. Often this is the only continuous family relationship that endures from childhood to old age.

Sibling bonds developed in early childhood continue through life. Siblings provide companionship and emotional support, needed material resources, and guidance in old age. Sharing a family history is a foundation for continued interaction throughout life, and serves a special purpose in old age. Reminiscences about family experiences validate the older person's memories and feelings about these events and help them to have positive feelings about their family life. A number of studies have found that all siblings feel a greater sense of closeness in the later years, reducing feelings of conflict and envy and deepening their approval and acceptance of one another.

Caregiving

When older family members become widowed, develop frail physical health, have financial difficulties, or suffer from problems with cognitive functioning, family members step in and provide an extraordinary amount of care. Most of this care is provided by women — wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law — who make a number of sacrifices

as they assume the emotional, financial, and physical demands of 24-hour care, and worry about the elder's future well-being. Most caregivers report that emotional strains are the most difficult part of caregiving.

More information about caregiving and about how to manage the stresses associated with providing care is found in two publications available in your county extension office, *What is Caregiving?* and *Guidelines for Caregivers*.

Conclusions

Families face new challenges in later life. To an extent, these experiences are an expected part of the experience of aging, as with retirement and widowhood. Other challenges are due to the changing demographics of our society and have not been confronted by previous generations.

The following steps can help families to prepare for and to cope with both the expected and unexpected changes of aging.

- Above all, show your love and affection to your spouse or companion, children, grandchildren, parents, and siblings. Spend time together doing things you enjoy, talking, and simply relaxing. Acknowledge the unique talents and traits that make family members special. Express your appreciation for the love and support you receive. Reflect on your experiences together as a family.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle throughout your life. Eat nutritious foods, maintain an optimal weight, exercise regularly, and get plenty of rest. Learn effective techniques for reducing stress, such as relaxation exercises, looking at problems in a positive light, and resolving conflicts with mutual respect and caring. These steps build strong families.
- During difficult times, such as a divorce, serious illness, or death of a family member, reach out to others for companionship and support.
- If you are a caregiver, take time for yourself. Visit friends, go for a walk, join a support group.

Ask for help from other family members or locate paid help if needed.

- Talk with family members about the topics covered in this publication. Discuss the changes everyone is experiencing as the family grows older. Talk about your feelings about these changes, and what needs to be done to prepare for the future. This may be difficult, but can increase understanding and closeness among family members, and bring peace of mind to everyone concerned.
- Look for more information about topics that interest you, such as preparation for retirement, loss and grief, or caregiving. Information on many of these issues is available from the Cooperative Extension Service in your county.

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