

## Caregiving Issues Facing the Multi-Generational Family

By Helen Hunter, ACSW, CMSW

There are many family situations today where you can find three, four or even five generations living under one roof. While the circumstances that result in multi-generational living vary from financial to health-related to simple family closeness, those who live in these types of households deal with many issues. Serving as the main caregiver for an older relative, dealing with grandchildren and having one of their own children living back at home after several years on his/her own can be a challenge for the best of families.

In dealing with your older relative, the most critical aspect is not just tending to their physical needs, but providing them with the emotional support they require as well. Often, it is coping with these emotional needs that is most time consuming and stressful. Family members often ask "How do I talk to my relative about. . ." (You fill in the blank.) The answer is "Not easily." Remember, your job is to help your older relative make informed, reasonable decisions for themselves, not to make the decision for them. It is also important to realize that they may be frightened about their overall condition, and that this frightened state is relayed through anger toward YOU, the main caregiver. It is crucial to keep the lines of communication open between the generations so that both of you can express your fears and concerns as honestly as possible. You may also wish to gain as much knowledge as possible regarding the older person's condition so that you know what to expect of them now and in the future. In that way, you can let them maintain their sense of independence and well-being and provide the needed care when it becomes necessary.

Children, even at an early age, can be asked to take on family responsibilities. They can be very helpful and resourceful. They can perform everyday chores like cleaning and help in preparation of meals and laundry. They can also help Grandma or Grandpa by sitting with them, reading together or watching TV, among other things. By involving children, you are giving them an honest look into the daily care giving process and you open the door to start a dialogue about aging issues in general. The relationship between an older relative and a child is invaluable in that the older person provides educational and historical information that is passed on to another generation and the child can give new and fresh insight on things for the older person.

When an older relative begins to fail, either mentally or physically, it can be very confusing and sometimes frightening for a child. There are many resources geared specifically for children that explain the aging process. Children are seen as extremely therapeutic assets as families deal with the daily issues associated with the care of a relative.

Older relatives can also be an invaluable resource to their grandchildren. They can serve as educators, story tellers and, in many instances, serve as the primary providers of care to their grandchildren. Many older people end up "raising" their grandchildren due to a variety of circumstances. These older relatives struggle not only with the daily demands of care needed by their grandchildren, but also with the concerns and struggles that their own children (the grandchildren's parents) face and their own health and financial issues.

Those who are in the "sandwich generation" often are faced with the daily demands of care needed by their parents or older relatives AND are responsible for the raising of their own children. In addition, they may have to deal with their own health and financial worries. Other responsibilities faced by this generation include the demands of a work schedule and their relationship with a spouse or significant other, in addition to their ongoing relationship with siblings and close friends.

Regardless of their age, there are many instances where the main caregiver in the family refuses to acknowledge that they can't handle the load. They are too caught up in the daily grind that they don't recognize the warning signals, which can include extreme fatigue, lack of rest, irritability, and frustration over lack of free time. Letting others know your feelings and

that you need help is crucial to the caregiver's mental and physical well-being.

It is also important to negotiate the exact roles of each family member in terms of providing care. Some may feel more comfortable with hands-on duties – others may want to only focus on household chores or helping with transportation or financial and legal issues.

There are many instances where the care receiver is very stubborn and resistant to any help, even from family members. In these cases you need to be FIRM in expressing the reality of the situation and that the person needs assistance. It is particularly important for those living in multi-generational households who often are providing 24 hours a day/7 days a week care to have an occasional respite break.

With family members living longer, many individuals are faced with the prospect of being a caregiver for a significant number of years. More and more families are opting to live in a mutli-generational household for a variety of reasons, including providing care for a loved one. It is important for the family to recognize that, in many cases, they will not be able to tend to all the needs of their relative, and that they will have to rely on others for occasional support. The support is available – just ask.