

**Clients may face conflicts over care of parents:
Advisors can help resolve tensions among siblings
while building a trusting relationship with the family**

By Rosemary McCracken

Caring for an elderly parent is a time for brothers and sisters to come together, do what has to be done and support each another.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way. The demands of caregiving and the fact that Mom and/or Dad won't be around much longer can cause old, unresolved family rivalries to surface.

As an advisor, you'll need to be alert to these conflicts. Your loyalties, of course, will be with your client, whether he or she is the elderly parent or one of the boomer children. But, as a trusted outsider, your detached perspective can help resolve tensions. You will better serve your client and, as a result, you will win the confidence and, perhaps, the business of the entire family.

"Because of the pressures we face — careers, raising children, new romantic relationships — boomers may not have spent much time nurturing sibling relationships," says Peggy Grall, a transition coach in Freelon, Ont. "We're pulled in so many directions that brothers and sisters may be fourth or fifth in our priorities.

"Our siblings may not even live in the same part of the country as we do," she adds. "Then, because Mom is going downhill, siblings are brought together at the worst possible time."

Add this emotional fragility to unpleasant or unforgiven issues and the siblings' relationships can deteriorate drastically. "Old rivalries are resurrected," says Clarissa Green, who designed and teaches in the University of British Columbia's working with an elderly population program in Vancouver. "Adult children find themselves replaying old roles in the family, often acting like 10-year-olds at the age of 56."

There is no doubt some conflicts have roots in competition between or among siblings. Many boomers grew up competing with their brothers and sisters, Green says, because boomers' parents often encouraged competitiveness among their children to make them excel in school and sports.

"At that time, this was considered good parenting," she says. "As a result, adult children may still be competing — for Mom's affection or for the role of chief decision-maker."

A primary caregiver's physical and emotional burnout can also spark conflict.

"A 'silent conversation' usually takes place in the family [when a parent becomes increasingly frail]," Green says. "The assumption is that one child will assume the role of primary caregiver. It may be the eldest son, the unmarried daughter or the child who feels she 'owes' her parents for caring for her during an illness.

"But if one person takes on most of the responsibility, he or she is at high risk of burnout," she adds. "I urge families to talk about their roles in caring for Mom or Dad, and try to even the playing field."

Even if adult children live out of town and can't take on caregiving roles, there are other roles they can adopt. "They can be the ones who communicate with the financial advisor or geriatric-care manager," says Peter Silin, a social worker who operates Diamond Geriatrics, a geriatric-care management firm in Vancouver.

"And they can provide support to the sibling who lives near the parent," he adds. "Listening can be a big help. They can ask siblings in more hands-on roles what they need and let them voice their frustration."

Family conflicts also arise when one sibling is in denial over a parent's deteriorating condition. This person may be avoiding facing the parent's eventual death and his or her own sense of loss. "For some people," says Grall, "denial goes way past the time when something should be done about Mom's forgetfulness."

Family members can help by getting the sibling to verbalize his or her fears. "And, when those fears are out on the table," she adds, "the family can continue the conversation, discussing the next steps to be taken."

Greed can also spark family conflicts. "One child may question whether Mom really needs a certain level of care," Silin warns. "But it's really about 'Let's not spend all her money before she dies'."

Finally, siblings' spouses can contribute to family conflicts. "A spouse doesn't have the same emotional attachment to the parent," Grall says, "and may not have the patience to determine what's in the best interest of the elderly person."

In-laws bring their own issues into the mix, Silin adds: "They may resent the time spent on an elderly mother-in-law because they feel [the couple isn't] doing enough for their own parents. And they may think their spouse is being taken advantage by his or her brothers and sisters."

There are ways to resolve these conflicts, and you can help by steering clients toward solutions.

> **Stay Focused.** Keeping the focus on the primary objective — Mom's or Dad's well-being — is the solution to these family conflicts. "Clients should assume their brothers' and sisters' good intentions for their parents," Grall says. "They should recognize that old rivalries can surface — and resolve to deal with them at another time."

Once siblings stop competing, they'll replace this behaviour with something else, Green says: "And that's appreciation, validation and acknowledgement of what the brother and sister are contributing. It can make people feel very vulnerable. I've seen boomers cry upon being told they're appreciated."

And this goes for siblings' spouses, as well. If an in-law is adding to the conflict, encourage the family to keep the focus on the elderly person and making the best decisions for that person, Grall says.

> **Get An Agreement.** Grall advises clients get agreements from everyone on the fundamental issue: that Mom or Dad can no longer stay at home. "From there," she says, "hammer out all the other areas of agreement. Listen to the suggestions of the other siblings and try to be flexible."

> **Exploit Skill Sets.** The differences among siblings can be the fuel for solutions. "Look at the different skill sets each child brings to the table," Grall says. "See how they can be used productively."

It will become increasingly important for boomers to keep sibling relationships alive, Green adds: "Boomers will need their siblings. Many boomers don't have children, or their children may be located across the continent. Unless there is a big age gap, siblings share a common bond of family history and shared activities." **IE**