

Dear Age Sage,

My parents are both 83 and I'm beginning to notice they are no longer able to handle some of the daily tasks that used to be second nature to them. I know they need more care and when I suggest that my siblings and I could help, they insist that they can handle things just fine. Is there ever a right time for the children to "butt in?"

Signed,  
Ready to "Butt in"

Dear Ready:

This sounds like the perfect time to "butt in." How does your mother wish to be cared for when she is no longer able to do so? What level of care will you provide for your aging father? Where will your parents live if they can no longer live independently? One of the most traumatic changes wrought by the aging process is the reversal of family roles. How to care for an aging parent or family member is an important matter that deserves consideration and discussion *before* a loved one begins to require assistance.

Medical advances have translated into a longer life expectancy. Nearly 14 percent of the U.S. population is 65 or older. As loved ones age, however, the responsibility to provide care and support often falls on partners or adult children. Today, 70 to 80 percent of American families provide care for an aging family member. That's almost 44.4 million caregivers!

Reversing caregiving roles with a parent or spouse, often called role reversal, is a time of confusion. The challenge facing new caregivers becomes a question of how to balance the health needs of their loved one while providing them with the lifestyle they desire. It is important to help the care-receiver maintain independence and lessen the strain of role reversal. For parents, shifting the responsibilities with adult children or loved ones is an emotionally stressful time. Many adults fear becoming a burden or losing control of their lives. This transition can be smoothed by giving everyone involved respect and consideration while they adjust. Making sure your parents are fully involved in their care is crucial to easing the strain of role reversal. Keep the following in mind:

- Unless your parent is suffering from Alzheimer's or severe mental incapacitation, allow them to maintain full decision making power.
- Make your parent a central part of all discussions and actions concerning their welfare.
- Agree on ground rules and set limits to give structure to their lives and curtail unrealistic expectations.

Role reversal can be equally upsetting to the adult children and spouses. Those with new caregiving responsibilities often find themselves overwhelmed with conflicting emotions: guilt, grief, anger and worry. First and most important, a caregiver must take care of themselves in order to care for others. Some helpful tips include:

- Prioritize. Decide whether your role is to achieve short term stability or to accept a long-term caregiving role.
- Involve others. Don't be afraid to delegate responsibility among family members. Remember asking for help is not a sign of inadequacy!
- Be good to yourself. Make time to spend on things you enjoy and cultivate a life outside of your caregiving role.
- Find a support group. Check your community church or yellow pages to find solace in others experiencing similar situations.

Role reversal involves adding a new dimension to your life, not abandoning it. Realize that these changes, while stressful, represent an opportunity for your family and loved ones to grow closer. It may seem like role reversal disrupts the family hierarchy irreparably, but an open mind and a positive attitude can help the entire family adopt new roles.

**TIP:**

**Take this opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your parent(s) and thank them for the support and love they have given you.**

Until next month,

The Age Sage

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