

Breaking Old Patterns: Navigating Family Dynamics In Aging Parent Care

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Taking care of aging parents, regardless of your progress with individualization and acquisition of adult accomplishments, brings us back to default programming. It takes us back to where we learned to be who we are. You may find yourself enacting your old roles in your family of origin, despite trying to avoid old traps or regressions. When we strive to transform ourselves into the individuals we aspire to be, rather than conforming to the expectations ingrained in us during our upbringing, we might mistakenly anticipate a magical transformation of our family members into our ideal versions of them. Chances are that your family of origin is just as you left it. People continue to play the old family games, albeit with a potentially more sophisticated twist. Most individuals hold the belief that their own perceptions of reality are universally shared, assuming that others possess similar perspectives.

Consequently, we often anticipate that others will think, feel, and act in a manner consistent with our inclinations in any situation. When returning to the family to care for aging parents, you may expect that the "baby," or "the problem child," who never got too far from home, will step up and take on at least their share of the caregiving. When that does not happen, you will probably feel resentment and anger.

To be effective in caregiving without losing your mind, you must understand how history colors current perceptions, manage your expectations regarding change or the status quo, and acknowledge that slipping back into old family roles is common.

Families very much affect how we see the world. Each family member has their recall of family events and issues and sees the world through their own unique experience (filters). The filters, although individualized, are

impacted by family rules, whether implicit or explicit. Family rules tend to persist throughout a lifetime.

Family rules are indicative of significant differences between healthy and unhealthy families. Family members' jobs are to serve the family system - in one way or another. To do that, individual family members often assume specific family roles that can endure throughout their lifetime, get replicated in other systems (such as work, church, etc.), and may pass to the next generation through teachings. Rules govern the enactment of these roles. Childhood family dynamics are still present in your adulthood. Your family of origin may expect you to assume your old roles. If you balk at that, others may resent you even for choosing a more effective way of doing things. One major rule is that you cannot question the rules or methods of doing things.

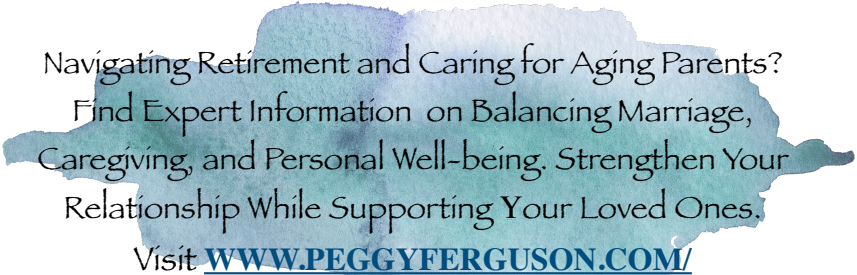
All right, so the family is continuing to function in its usual manner. How can we navigate back into the family dynamic to assist our aging parents while maintaining our sanity and well-being?

Begin by understanding that the system has mostly stayed the same. Whatever roles and behaviors your parents and siblings played earlier in your life are still there. Understand that and know that you cannot make them change. Identify what you do have control over—you. Regardless of the old hot buttons, the games, old emotions, and double binds, you get to decide how you will respond. You are in charge of your feelings. Don't take the bait. If, during your upbringing, the family dynamic involved tiptoeing around Dad to prevent provoking his anger, and you have exerted considerable effort to avoid taking responsibility for others' emotions, hold on to those acquired skills and apply them within your family. Do not allow others to persuade you that your perception of reality is incorrect. Reject the notion that you are obligated to assume responsibility for Dad's emotions and manipulate the environment to prevent his anger. Recall that no matter what you did, you could not prevent Dad from getting mad. Let go of that notion. Use the same skills you use with others with Dad, and let him be responsible (or not) for his feelings. Don't go back to old unproductive approaches to being with your family. Let go of emotional reactions.

Take a couple of steps outside the system and problem-solve. Ask yourself, "What needs to happen here?" "What is necessary for me to be able to do care for myself and my family?" "What can I comfortably do to honor and care for my parent without sacrificing myself or my family?" Move into problem-solving. "What are my resources? Monetary, other siblings, professionals, community resources, etc.?" Resist the expectations imposed by other family members, which demand that you care for the aging parent and shoulder the responsibilities concerning your siblings. When a parent, close to the end of their life, has been enabling under-functioning adult children, they may be looking for the next team to step up and take over, enabling where they will be left off. Even though other family members may expect you to move into old dysfunctional roles, remember that you don't have to. Deliberate and make a clear decision regarding what tasks and responsibilities you are willing to undertake and those you choose not to pursue. Communicate your resolve without apologizing, complaining, whining, etc. Period. Don't expect others to applaud your setting boundaries. They won't.

Follow through with your decisions and actions without expecting external validation or praise from others. Don't let yourself be guilted into doing everything. If the aging parent exhibits anger, hostility, and demanding behavior, seek assistance in managing the situation. Avoid engaging in arguments, defensiveness, or confrontation with the parent. When tensions rise, take a break by removing yourself from the situation and prioritize self-care. Request support from other family members in de-escalating conflicts and find someone to confide in regarding the emotional impact of this process.

Don't let your emotional reactions keep you from doing what you decided you could do to help your parent. Learn to detach with love. Don't subject yourself to abuse that you will internalize. Be flexible and understand that you can have negative thoughts and



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feelings about that parent and other family members but can still help your parent by using proactive problem-solving and self-care.