

CARING FOR AGING PARENTS  
WITH OUR SIBLINGS  
BY **DR. AMY D'APRIX**

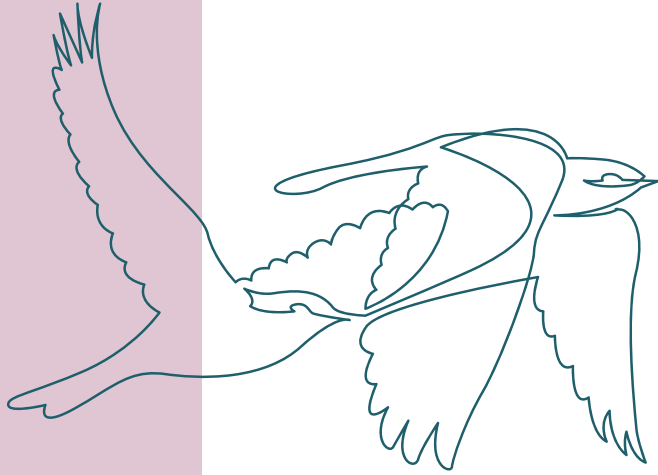


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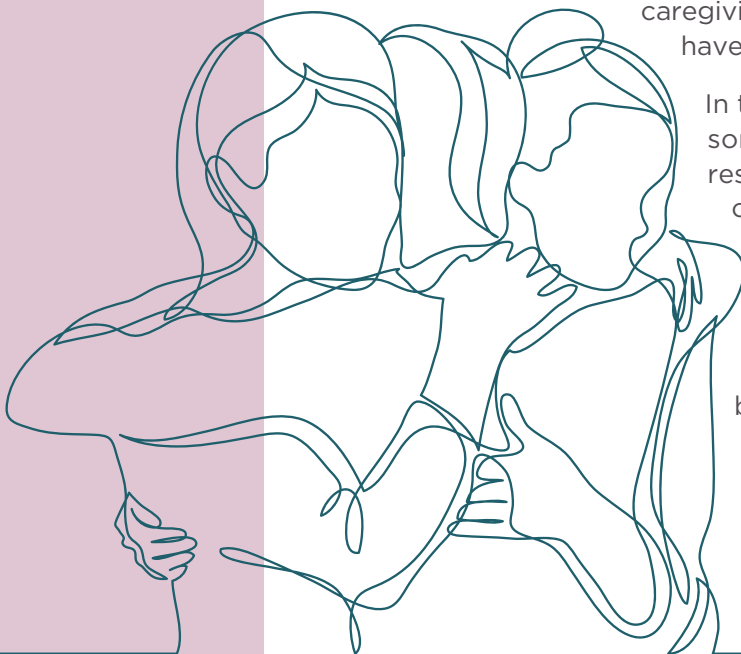
# INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of my social work career, I met with a woman who was caring for her aging parents. She was an only child and lamented the fact she had no siblings to help her care for her parents. She told me, “If only I had siblings, this would be so much easier.” Right after our session, I met with another woman who was caregiving for her aging parents and had three siblings. When I asked her how caregiving was going, she said without hesitation, “My siblings are the problem! Without them, I could manage caregiving just fine.”

As these stories illustrate, caring for an aging parent can become further complicated, or enriched, by our relationships with our siblings and their involvement with caregiving. There are common issues that siblings often face while caring for a parent. For example, struggling to reach an agreement with a sibling about a care-related issue, or trying to engage a sibling who lives far away. Or, perhaps your sibling thinks you are handling things just fine and doesn't realize that you need tangible help while caring for your parents. It's also possible that your sibling has made it clear they have no interest in caregiving, and you are grappling with the fact they have left the responsibility solely to you.

In this book, I provide tips about managing some of these sibling-related issues. Having respectful, open and honest relationships with our siblings about caregiving issues can go a long way to ensuring harmony, both today and after your parents are no longer with you.

I hope my advice will help you to achieve health and happiness not only for your parents, but your whole family.





## GETTING ON THE SAME PAGE AS YOUR SIBLINGS

Discovering that you and your siblings have very different perspectives about your parents' situation may be one of the most surprising—and challenging—aspects of providing support for them as they age. In my experience, it is quite rare for all family members to see things in the same way, and this can often lead to strained relationships among siblings. In addition, older adults may feel pulled between the conflicting viewpoints of their adult children and become uncomfortable making decisions about their future until there is agreement.

Thus, for the good of the whole family, it is important for us to explore how we can get on the same page with our siblings and work together to support our aging parents.

### COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUE: POSITIONS VS. INTERESTS

I suggest to sibling groups that they approach their parents' situation from the perspective of “interests” instead of “positions.” These terms come from the book, *Getting to Yes*, by Fisher and Ury. “Positions” are the viewpoints we hold about what is best or right. For example, one sibling may believe that they should talk to their parents about considering a move into a retirement residence so that they have more opportunities for socialization, more support available, and an overall better quality of life. Another sibling may not want their parents to leave their current home because they think that it is the only place they can be happy. When people hold fast to their positions, it is very difficult to find a harmonious solution, and the conflict often escalates over time.

Switching the focus to what Fisher and Ury call “interests” can completely shift a conversation and allow mutually-agreeable solutions to emerge. Interests are the reasons that people hold on to their positions. Siblings can better understand each other's interests by asking a simple question such as, “Tell me why mom and dad staying in their current home is important to you?”

## A REAL WORLD EXAMPLE

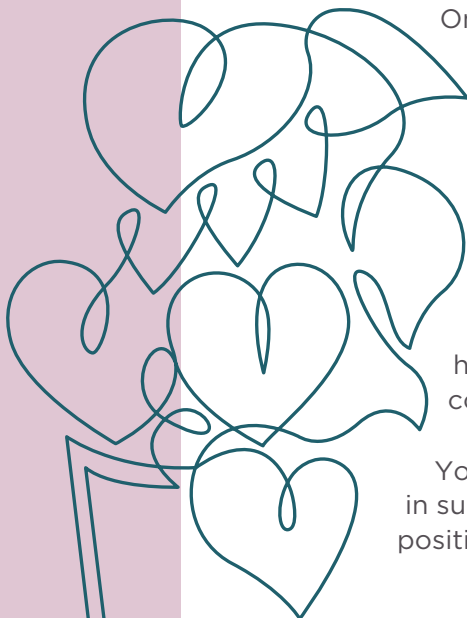
Many people don't step back to understand why they feel so strongly about the positions they hold. I found this to be true for a family of three siblings I recently worked with. Two of the brothers felt their mom and dad should seriously consider a move into a retirement residence. The third brother felt just as strongly they should stay in their own home. This caused a great deal of conflict among the siblings, with accusations flying in all directions. In addition, their parents felt torn about considering options for their future because of the conflict among their sons.

When I spoke with the siblings individually, I found the son who didn't want his parents to move did understand they weren't safe in their current home; however, he thought if his father moved he would miss his garden so much that he wouldn't have a good quality of life in a retirement residence. For him, this belief about his father's quality of life outweighed his safety concerns.

Once the brothers understood the interests that were behind their positions, they could get creative about solutions.

They brainstormed ways their father may still be able to garden if the parents' decided to move into a retirement residence. They spoke with staff at a community they were interested in, and found their father a suite that had space for a couple of flower window boxes. When they discussed this possibility with their parents, they found they were relieved to let go of the responsibility of their large house and garden, and were thrilled with the idea they could still have some flower boxes. They were also very happy that the conflict among their sons had ended.

You have the power to help your family get on the same page in supporting your aging parents. Shift the conversation from positions to interest, and watch the creative solutions emerge!



# CHAPTER 2



## INVOLVING YOUR SIBLINGS IN THE CAREGIVING OF YOUR PARENTS

Are you the caregiver for your parents and are finding it frustrating that other family members aren't doing more to help?

If so, I'm going to suggest you give up that role. No—I don't mean stop providing care for your parents, I mean to stop being *the* caregiver. Instead, I encourage you to be the *primary* caregiver in a caregiving family. I promise this isn't just a matter of semantics and actually has the potential to positively change your caregiving experience, improve your relationships with other family members and enhance your parent's care. When you start referring to yourself as the primary caregiver in a caregiving family, it allows room for others to take a more active role, as well as serves as a reminder to you that caregiving is not a solo activity.

### STEP 1: EXAMINE WHY YOUR SIBLINGS AREN'T HELPING OUT

You may wonder why your siblings aren't doing more to help with your parent's care. The answer to why siblings don't jump in to help with caregiving is usually multifaceted. One common reason is that they—like you—are living very busy lives and are having trouble keeping up with their current responsibilities. If they aren't fully aware that you are having trouble managing all of your own responsibilities, or don't realize your parents need more help, they may not offer to do more or even inquire about what is needed.

## **STEP 2:** **SHARE THE FULL PICTURE WITH YOUR FAMILY**

It's also important to realize that the primary caregiver typically has much more information about their parent's care needs than the rest of the family. Family members who visit occasionally only get a snapshot of what is happening with their parents, and this could be an inaccurate representation of what a typical day looks like. In contrast, the primary caregiver has more regular contact and sees what I call the "movie" of their parents' lives. This points to the need to find ways to keep your siblings better informed so they will be more likely to help out.

One way to accomplish this is to set up a group email with your family and—as the primary caregiver—send frequent updates. A group text is also useful for more immediate information that needs to be conveyed.

## **STEP 3:** **HAVE PROACTIVE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITIES**

Don't wait until you are resentful and burning out to ask your siblings for help; instead, have proactive planning discussions. The earlier you have these conversations, the better. Be as clear as possible about what you are willing and able to do, and then make specific requests for help. People usually respond better to requests that are specific and time-limited.

Getting your siblings involved may feel like an impossible task. Yet, many times, I have heard family members say, "I'm happy to take care of X, as I didn't know you needed any help. You seemed to be managing everything so well." Meanwhile the primary caregiver felt overwhelmed and burdened!

Caregiving, like child-rearing, requires a village. Make sure that you aren't trying to do the work of a village all by yourself!



# CHAPTER 3



## ENGAGING LONG-DISTANCE SIBLINGS IN CAREGIVING

Are you feeling frustrated that you're taking on the majority of your parents' caregiving because your siblings live far away? I want to share a story with you.

### MEET GINETTE

Ginette\* recently called me because she felt like she was “at the end of her rope.” She had been providing care and support to her parents, who were living in their own home. Her dad has Parkinson’s disease and her mom struggles with her own health challenges. Ginette knew that major decisions about housing and care needed to be made in the near future, and she was feeling overwhelmed.

I inquired if Ginette had other family members that might be able to help her in providing support to her parents. She told me she had one sister, Marta,\* who lives several hours away. Ginette said she and Marta had a good relationship, but she was getting increasingly aggravated that the whole responsibility of caring for their parents was falling to her.

\*Names have been changed for privacy.



## STEP 1: MAKE A LIST

I asked Ginette to make a list of everything she does to help her parents so we could discuss it. When she went through her caregiving list with me, I suggested several ways in which Marta could be a “caregiver from a distance,” something I am very familiar with because I was once a long-distance caregiver myself.

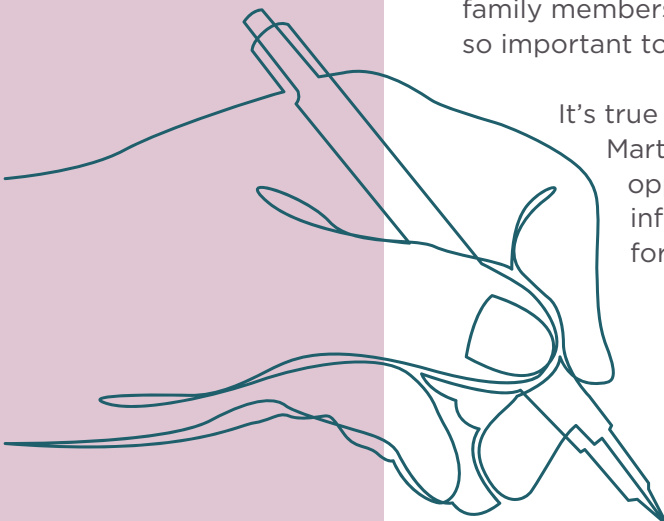
From Ginette’s list of responsibilities, the following are things she realized her sister could do from a distance:

- Manage their parents’ finances through online banking and online bill paying
- Call their parents on a regular basis to provide emotional support
- Call Ginette on a regular basis to get updates and provide emotional support
- Act as a “thought partner” with Ginette and their parents about making plans for future care and living arrangements
- Set up doctor’s appointments and physiotherapy appointments
- Call to arrange transportation to appointments
- Use vacation time to give Ginette the opportunity to go away

## STEP 2: COMMUNICATE HOW YOU ARE FEELING

Ginette started to feel less burdened just knowing there were things Marta could do. I suggested that she call Marta and let her know that providing support to their parents was taking more and more of her time and she could really use some help. Ginette was surprised when Marta replied, “I had no idea you needed help. You seem to manage everything so easily.” This is a common story I hear from primary caregivers: When they talk with other family members about needing some support, they find out their siblings truly had no idea they needed help. I believe this is usually because family members assume that “no news is good news,” and that’s why it is so important to share as much information with them as possible.

It’s true that not every family member will jump in as willingly as Marta did. However, you won’t know unless you give them the opportunity. It starts with being more deliberate about sharing information about concerns you may have and making requests for help with specific tasks.





## WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY SIBLINGS WON'T HELP?

Adult sibling relationships can bring much joy into our lives; and—for some—they can also bring pain and disappointment. In my experience, caregiving for an aging parent can often highlight our differences and challenge our family relationships in new ways. It's common for siblings to disagree on matters like how best to support an aging parent, but sometimes brothers and sisters can also differ on how involved they are with the caregiving of their parents.

If you find you're the person providing the most care to your parent, you may want to engage your siblings and come up with creative ways they can also provide support—but what do you do if you have a sibling who is unwilling to help out?

### MEET LISA AND DAVID

I had a client, Lisa\*, who came to talk with me because she was very upset that her only brother, David\*, was not helping her with the care of their dad. She was furious with her brother and told me they had always been close and that she felt abandoned by him now that she needed his help. I suggested that the three of us meet to discuss the situation.

While we were all together, Lisa shared with her brother the details of their dad's care needs and made specific requests for David's help. David explained that although he didn't want Lisa to be negatively impacted, he was not going to help with their dad's care. He said that he and his father had always had a difficult relationship and he felt no responsibility to help him now.

\*Names have been changed for privacy.

## FOCUSING ON THE PRACTICAL

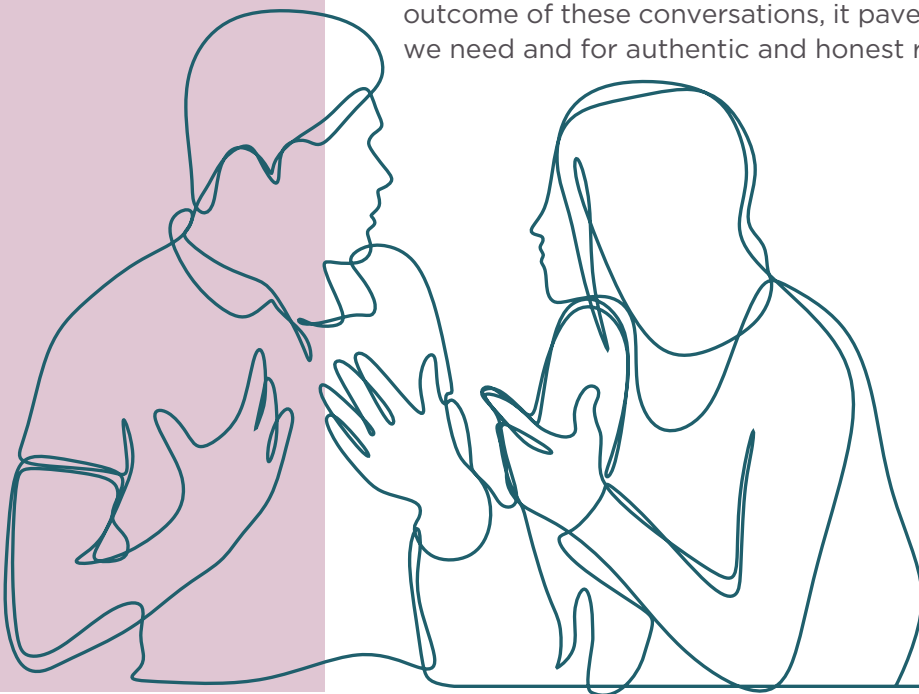
Once it's clear that a sibling is not going to pitch in, I recommend that you as the primary caregiver switch your focus to the practical issue of getting the caregiving help you need, sorting out your feelings about your sibling later on. For example, in Lisa's case we worked together to make a list of people who might be willing to do one or two things to help her out. One of Lisa's friends was a great cook, so she decided to ask her if she would make a dinner or two for her father each week. Lisa's friend not only agreed to bring a dinner over every Tuesday, but asked three of their other friends to choose another night of the week to bring over a meal. That alone made Lisa feel better!

Often, much of our energy is so focused on what our siblings are or aren't doing that once a discussion occurs—even if our siblings choose not to help—time and energy are freed up to find solutions for care. This isn't a cop out or "letting siblings off the hook," it is simply dealing with the reality of the situation even if it's not what we hoped for. Finding creative solutions may require sitting down with a friend or professional who can offer a new perspective.

## SORTING THROUGH THE EMOTIONAL

Once Lisa had some caregiving support, she then had to sort through her hurt and anger towards her brother and determine what type of relationship she wanted with him in the future. This wasn't easy. Lisa realized she and her brother did not share some core values about family, and that made her sad. She decided she still wanted a relationship with David, but she wasn't sure she would ever feel as close to him again.

Although we can't predict the outcome, having conversations with our siblings about our parents' situation and needs and asking for specific help is the best starting point to engaging our siblings. No matter what the outcome of these conversations, it paves the way for getting the support we need and for authentic and honest relationships with our siblings.





## FINAL THOUGHTS

As you and your siblings consider how to best support your parents' independence and quality of life as they age, you may want to talk with them about the benefits of retirement living. Your parents will have privacy in their own space, but also benefit from a social community of peers and staff. Many people who move to retirement living appreciate that they are freed from the day-to-day responsibilities of running a home, and can use their time and energy to participate in activities and outings that they enjoy.

In addition to being an excellent solution for many of your parents' needs, retirement living can provide peace of mind for your whole family. You will know your parent has the quality of life they deserve in a safe and supportive environment with dedicated staff. This alone can ease the worries many families have as their parents age, and contribute to a harmonious solution for everyone.

Perhaps it's time for you and your siblings to talk with your parents about the many benefits of retirement living. Whatever the support option, I hope you can work together for the benefit of your parents and achieve the family harmony everyone deserves.



## EXPLORING RETIREMENT LIVING OPTIONS ON BEHALF OF AN AGING PARENT?

If you feel your loved one may benefit from the supportive, worry-free lifestyle in a retirement community, visit [chartwell.com](https://www.chartwell.com) or call us at **1-855-461-0685** today to get your questions answered and find the nearest Chartwell residence to you. From there you can schedule a personalized tour of your residence of choice so you and your parent can experience what it's like to live there firsthand.

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### ABOUT DR. AMY D'APRIX

Dr. Amy D'Aprix, MSW, PhD., is a social worker, facilitator and coach specializing in life transition topics related to aging, retirement and caregiving. She regularly meets with clients and conducts speaking engagements promoting honest and productive discussion, and is passionate about helping people find meaning and fulfillment as they age—as well as in their role as a family caregiver.

Dr. Amy currently serves as the Vice President of the International Federation on Aging, is on the International Faculty for the Society of Certified Senior Advisors, and is a part of the Canadian Academy of Senior Advisors. She is also well-known as the Co-Founder of the Essential Conversations Project.

**For more advice from Dr. Amy, explore her blog and video series on [chartwell.com](https://www.chartwell.com).**