

## October Senior Sense: Caring With Siblings: How to Make It Work

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I was having dinner with my children after spending the day setting up my mother's new assisted living apartment. My husband wasn't home yet – he had to return the U-Haul we had rented to transport my mother's furniture. During dinner, I got a text from my sister who lives out of state: *Did Mum move? How is she?*

When I replied, I added a subject to the verb “move” and wrote: *I moved Mum*. I wanted to be clear: our 84 year-old mother with stage 4 ovarian cancer didn't move herself. She was moved – by me. I took the day off from work. I recruited my husband for help. I rented a truck for her belongings. I worked hard all day.

When my mother got sick, I felt like my life was out of control because I was trying to juggle working, parenting, and caring for her. Meanwhile, from my vantage point, it seemed like my sister's life was business as usual – a few phone calls and texts asking for updates, but other than that, no additional worries or responsibilities.

The truth was that my sister's life was also upended – just in a different way. While I had both the blessing and the burden of living close to our mother, my sister was worrying from afar and feeling helpless.

But I was “the one.” Most caregivers and healthcare professionals know, “there's always one.” That's the standard phrase for the fact there is always one sibling who shoulders most of the responsibility for caregiving. Sometimes you're the one because you are the take charge type. Sometimes your parents choose you and sometimes geography does. If you are the one, it can feel like dealing with your siblings is impossible. But there are ways to make it work. Here's how:

Mind your thoughts. It is easy to become resentful when you are ‘the one.’ “Where's the help?” “Why is this on me?” And of course, “This isn't fair.” Your resentment may very well be justified but try to release it. Negative thoughts harm you more than they harm anyone else.

Very little is in our control when it comes to aging and illness. But we can control our thoughts. And when we choose our thoughts, we feel better. I knew I had to find a way to feel better about my caregiving situation, or the resentment would eat me alive. So, I decided I'd rather be thankful that I was able to manage so much, than be resentful that I had to do so much. I chose to be grateful that I had the strength, stamina, resources and organizational skills to be “the one” for our family.

Beware magical thinking. While you are focused on your thoughts, beware the wishful ones. Caregiving is no time to wish your sister would get off her phone and get on a plane to come

help you. It is no time to wish your brother would offer to take your parents to the doctor instead of only offering to mow their lawn. Most likely you and your siblings have different strengths and weaknesses. Try to divvy up the responsibilities based on the strengths. And if a sibling just won't step up, don't waste time wishing they would. As unfair as it may feel, move on. You need to preserve your energy.

Communicate. If you want help from your siblings, the simple thing to do is ask them for it. Start by asking for their thoughts on your parents' situation. What are they thinking and observing? This simple first step will give you a sense of whether or not they are starting to notice or think about what you are noticing and worrying about and from there you can assess whether or not you are aligned or coming from two very different perspectives.

Lower your standards. If you are one of the lucky ones whose siblings want to help in supporting your aging parents, then make sure you make it possible for them to do so. You cannot expect that your sister or brother will handle things the same way you might. That's okay. As long as your parents' needs are being met, then lower your standards and let your siblings handle their assignments in their own way.

Act. If you are 'the one' chances are you are also your parents' power of attorney and healthcare proxy. If that is the case, you are in charge in the event your parents cannot make their own decisions. Own the role. It's good practice to ask for input from your siblings but know when to stop gathering opinions and act. Your parents chose you because they trust you. Now you need to trust yourself. If your siblings don't like it, that is unfortunate. Hopefully, they will understand if your decision isn't in line with their input. If they don't, just know you listened and acted with good intention.

Sibling dynamics are tricky under the best of circumstances. Caregiving makes them that much trickier. Act with a clear head and heart and let go of the rest!

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