

Caring for your Aging Loved Ones, Session 1

God places high value on the parent-child relations. He Himself specifies in the Fourth Commandment that we are to honor our parents, yet in working out this task of "honoring", we experience turmoil. Yet what does "honoring" mean in today's world? What must we do to honor our parents? And how can we honor them without dishonoring ourselves or our own family?

No other relationship in your life has this kind of history. Our parents were the ones who were in charge of our family, and from them we learned our initial meaning of love. They helped shape who we are, and now the time has come when the people who cared for us need our support and care. Where once we needed them, now they need us.

Few relationships in life offer more opportunity for spiritual growth than elder care giving. This opportunity can also be filled with conflicting emotions, including frustration, guilt, and hopelessness. Questions such as *how can I possibly do this? Who will help me? But I have a full time job!* fill us with worry. Lets begin by looking at some of the typical feelings and thoughts that caregivers have, which were reported by Dr. Richard Johnson in *Caring for Aging Parents*. Dr Johnson used an assessment tool called "The Strain-of-Care Inventory", and found that:

- Caregivers feel internal conflict, which is often repressed.
- Caregivers often attempt to limit their time spent with their aging parents, which leads the caregivers to perceive as evidence that they "are not doing all that they could". The emotional consequence of the caregivers' attempt to limit their time with their aging parent is guilt.
- When caregiving hinders adult children from enjoying social events with their spouse, marital strain increases.
- Caregivers report that when using negative patterns with their aging parent, they identify behaviors such as: *not calling their parent, shouting at them, avoiding them, cutting back on visits, leaving early, arguing, ignoring, intimidating, become angry, or showing disgust to them.*
- Many caregivers report that caring for their aging parent correlates with their own health deterioration.

The results from this study reinforced the identification of the most needed things of adult caregivers:

Information, and Support.

Information includes:

1. Learning about the needs of our aging parents, and of our own needs. A major issue for our aging parents is how "loss" impacts their lives, and the healthiness of grieving the losses they have experienced as they age.
2. Learning to develop and strengthen truly healthy relationships with our aging parents, which includes three essentials ingredients: genuineness, warmth, and unconditional positive regard. These ingredients mirror the love and acceptance God has for us through the redeeming work of His Son.
3. Learning how to break down barriers that may exist between us and our aging parents, such as myths or "hang-ups" about aging.
4. Learning how to foster positive communication between ourselves and our aging parents, using good listening skills, and offering empathy.

Support includes:

1. Joining a support group, where we can receive empathy and understanding from others who are in same role, and understand our struggle.
2. Connecting with our church family and community.
3. Re-connecting with our siblings.

We all have perceptions, beliefs, and viewpoints that we believe are true. We gained these through life experience, formal education, and our own family's unique rules for living. Just as we have learned things about life and human nature that are true, we have also learned things that are false. This applies to our perceptions, beliefs, and viewpoints about aging. Tonight we will look at the common myths and false beliefs about aging that make caring for our aging loved ones more difficult.

My aging loved one is a different person than who they used to be.

Your loved one may seem different, but the aging adult's behaviors are not substantially different from behavior in younger years, but it is modified. The personality can become magnified, sensationalized, and projected. And because of the losses that aging brings, the negative aspects of their personality often become magnified, not the positive ones.

My aging loved one shouldn't be changing. This false belief tends to be related to the caregivers' desire for security, and their hope that their elder loved one will stay as they are. The caregiver, often an adult child, struggles with their own "child within them" that wants everything in place so they can remain safe. Remember, change is part of life!

My aging loved one should be able to do more for themselves. Again, this false belief is often related to the caregivers' desire for their aging loved one to remain unchanged and retain the same capacities to care for themselves. Even though caregivers know this is impossible, they often want their aging loved one to "do just this one thing", such as get out more, interact more, read more, be more pleasant, etc. The list goes on and on, but it has one central goal-that the aging loved one remains the same. Our loved one's aging also reminds of us of our own aging, and mortality. Remember, you are not the sole source of wisdom about the welfare of your aging loved one.

I think my aging loved one should treat me better. This is an understandable belief, yet it also includes unspoken expectations: don't they see how much I do for them? How much I care for them? How much I worry about them? These expectations lead caregivers to be resentful of their aging loved ones' decline, when in reality, we offer care to them out of love, responsibility, and respect. Endeavor to not take their treatment personally.

Seek to see their harsh behavior as their attempt to get rid of their emotional distress over losses associated with aging.

I think I shouldn't have any negative feelings toward my aging loved one.

This false belief produces more guilt in caregivers than perhaps any other false belief. Our negative beliefs often stem from becoming increasingly aware and disappointed by our aging loved one's behaviors or acts of omission or commissions. Although these observations may be real, the caregiver often creates an illogical meaning about their disappointment, such as, "I must be bad, or uncaring, or spoiled, or self-centered to think this".

Remember, it is normal and natural to have some negative feelings about your aging loved one.

I must obey my aging parent. This stems from Exodus 20:12, where we read that we are to "Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee". As children, we honored our parents by obeying them, but as adults, we honor them by responsibly attending to their needs when they can no longer care for themselves, and holding them in high esteem.

I must fix my aging loved one's problem. Our "can do" attitude leads us to believe that we can fix all problems in our physical environment, yet we can't fix aging. We all age, we all change, and we all will encounter pain along the way. We may be able to slow the debilitation of aging, but we can not fix it on a physical level. Think of yourself as a "care manager" for your loved one, not the sole caregiver. Remember, you can not take responsibility for your aging loved one; only they can do that.

Because I believe I am responsible for my aging loved ones, it's my fault when things go wrong. This false belief stems from our personalization of our aging loved one's problems, and believing that we personally caused their problem. This self-depreciating pattern may stem from being falsely blamed early in life by your parents for their problems. This painful belief leads to false guilt and self-condemnation, and will erode your self-worth.

Remember, you are a child of God, and worthy in every way.

Caring for your Aging Loved Ones, Session 3

Unless our aging loved ones face a full-blown health crisis, it is likely that we'll see gradual and subtle changes in their physical and/or mental capabilities. For adult children, the realization that their aging parent is having difficulty managing areas of their life and that they need intervention, is a major turning point. This reality often fills adult children with conflicting feelings: we want the very best for our parents, but get tangled up in our own feelings, and find ourselves stuck in indecision. Our feelings stem from our evaluation of an event or situation.

Adult caregivers are often bombarded by painful feelings. It is our task to evaluate which of our painful feelings stem from peace-robbing negative thoughts and inaccurate evaluations. An important point to remember is that it is easier to replace negative thoughts than to try to block them out. Tonight we will look at typical painful feelings that adult caregivers struggle with that stem from negative thoughts and inaccurate evaluations, and replace them with truth so we can face caregiving with peace and contentment.

I feel guilt because I think I haven't done enough. Adult caregivers sometimes feel guilty not only because of omitted acts, but because of hidden resentment toward aging parents. These negative feelings of guilt can become so overwhelming that we become paralyzed by self-doubt and diminished self-worth. **Replace** this by reminding yourself that God forgives our caregiving mistakes, and that God is "faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9).

I feel sorry for my aging parents because of their losses they have experienced as they've aged, and have trouble accepting their dependency. The dependency of aging parents contrasts with our memories of our parents as self-directed people, and we want our parents to be as they once were. It is also unsettling to find that at times we can be emotionally dependent on our parents, and continue to desire their approval. **Replace** this by reminding yourself that "feeling sorry" drains your emotional energy and hinders you from seeing your aging parent's real needs, and will cause you to overcommit and indulge them. It sends a subtle message that your aging parent is incapable on one hand, and entitled to your help, on the

other. Replace this with empathy, not sympathy, and focus on your aging parent's experience at the moment.

I feel neglected because my parents have never given me the love that I've needed. In reality, you may not have been given the love you needed or desired from your parent, and you may be at an emotionally empty place now. Your emptiness and your parent's deficient efforts at loving you may lead you to do almost anything to receive their missed love. **Replace** this by acknowledging that although you did not receive the love from your parents you desired, your parents showed love. Respect your feelings while seeking to become aware of methods your parents showed their love to you.

I fear my aging parent will reject me if I don't do what they wish me to do. Justified or not, the fear of rejection can lead the adult child to do more and more for their aging parent. This traps the adult child into wanting approval, yet fearing that when received, it will be taken away. **Replace** this by reminding yourself that you will have your parent's love and acceptance to the degree that they can show that love and acceptance. We all have different methods and capacities for showing love. Your aging parent may have become hardened in their outward expression of love as they deal with losses of aging. Remind yourself that you are unconditionally loved and accepted by our Heavenly Father, who never changes.

I feel like I'm in the middle, and all alone with no one else to help. Without realizing it, some adult caregivers find themselves alone, and have maneuvered themselves between their aging parents and their other siblings, their other parent, their spouse, or other caregivers such as doctors, nurses, or dieticians. When this occurs, someone is always upset, and leads the adult child to take on the role of "defender" for their "victimized" aging parent. **Replace** this by respecting your feelings of isolation while reminding yourself that you are a fearfully and wonderfully made individual, and an important part of God's church. You are in a holy process of spiritual growth that God intends for your good, and the good of others. He promises not to abandon us, as we read Joshua 1:5: I will never leave you nor forsake you.

May you learn to replace your negative thoughts with the antidote of truth, and provide care for your aging parents while maintaining your peace of mind.

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