

## **ADULT CHILDREN/ROLE TRANSITION**

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One of the most difficult and challenging events for adult children is when the adult child enters into a parental role with their own parent. This generally happens when the adult child or children begin to observe that their parent[s] are having some difficulty in physically caring for themselves, or functioning independently in an adult role. While this is disturbing, the adult child becomes more supportive of their parents and starts assisting in several ways; they may begin to help with lawn care, shopping, and household tasks. Eventually, as the parents begin to lose more of their functioning, their adult children begin to compensate gradually for their parent's loss of abilities. At some point the parents may begin to display some resentment and even agitation at what they perceive as their children trying to tell them what to do.

While the adult children are trying to alleviate their parent's ineffectiveness in handling their affairs, the parents see this as meddling and demeaning. The adult child is making more phone calls to the parents, and the parents interpret this as being 'checked on'. The parents begin to feel they are losing control over their lives and independence and the adult children have become adept at assimilating tasks that their parents can no longer do. The parents may have increased physical problems or exhibit signs of confusion and the adult child takes on the role of a decision maker. The actual change from being a supportive adult child to a caregiver is usually precipitated by the parent engaging in an act that is dangerous and places them at risk.

Many of the adult children I talk with, describe situations in which the parent had put important papers in the oven, walked down the street at 2am wearing a nightgown and carrying an empty suitcase, went door to door giving neighbors money, or drove the car through the back of the garage. Thus begins, ideally, a family meeting in which the adult children are in agreement and begin to decide what is best for their parent's wellbeing. One of the most difficult events is when the parents are told, by their children, that the parents should no longer drive due to safety concerns for the parents and others. There is no easy way to do this; some adult children take the car away, others leave the car but take the keys, still others remove a vital piece of the engine so the car will not start. Some fortunate families exist in which the adult children explain to their parents they should no longer drive and the parents willingly relinquish the vehicle; this, however, is rare!

It is estimated that in the United States nearly a quarter of the households have an adult child who is providing care for a friend or family member over the age of 50. It is expected that this number will continue to rise as the aging population increases. Many of these adult children are trying to balance a job, their children, grandchildren, and their aging parents. There is a growing recognition of the need to develop programs to relieve caregiver stress and to assist adult children in receiving some relief to prevent negative effects of care giving on their physical and emotional health. Additionally, the aging

parents would benefit from assessments that measure their dimensions of functioning, overall health concerns, and quality of life.

One of the most poignant comments I hear from adult children is how difficult it is to become your parent's 'parent'. It is hard to take over the role for your parents that they once had for you, as their child. To tell your parents to attend to their personal care, to take over their finances, to determine where they should live, when to stop driving, what to do for their medical condition is a long, and sometimes sad journey. It can be made easier, if the adult children look for resources, and accept help to protect their own endurance and strength. Adult day services, respite care, and caregiver support groups relieve care giving stress and improve well being for primary caregivers, which, in turn, makes a better caregiver.

Most adult children who care for their parents find themselves conflicted as they try to find a balance between honoring their parent's wishes with the responsibility of acting on their parent's behalf. Parents should be empowered to make decisions for themselves as long as possible, with gentle guidance from their adult children. This can bring an opportunity for greater closeness between parent and child, leaving wonderful memories to treasure.

This fact sheet is provided as a public service of the Caregiver Resource Network. The **Caregiver Resource Network** is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. If interested in a speaker for your West Michigan group on the above theme call 1-888-456-5664. For more information on caregiving or the Caregiver Resource Network consult our website at [www.CaregiverResource.net](http://www.CaregiverResource.net) or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.