



**September 2009**

**Sue Ann Says: Mutual respect key to relationship between aging mother and caretaker daughter**

Even when my friend Jess was a teenager, she and her mother were close friends. They simply enjoyed each other's company. Their friendship deepened as Jess became a wife and mother herself. Her mom, Eva, was always there for support and empathy, a good laugh or a good cry. So I was shocked when Jess told me recently that she and her mom are fighting like cats and dogs. They're frustrated, angry, resentful and very sad. Eva, a "lady" who never, ever swears, calls Jess the "b" word. Jess says Eva is impossible. How could this happen?

Well, Eva is now 87, a recent widow in poor health and diminishing cognitive ability who insists on living in her home. With no help whatsoever, thank you. If she falls and breaks a hip again, so be it. If she forgets to take her blood pressure pill and has a stroke, that's her choice. Jess doesn't agree. She wants her mom to live independently, but she insists that safety has to come first. She doesn't think Eva is making sound decisions about her health and safety. And Eva thinks Jess is being bossy and overbearing.

I shared my friend's story with Geri Heppe, MS, a gerontologist and director of the Life Enrichment Center at Lutheran Homes of Oconomowoc. Geri explained that Jess and her mom are a classic example of the emotional struggle that occurs when roles reverse. Jess is now the caregiver and, like most women her age, often feels overwhelmed juggling that role with the demands of marriage, children and career. Meanwhile, Eva sees her own world shrinking, her friends dying, and decisions being made for her. She is desperately trying to hang on to her independence, power and control over her own life.

Parents and their adult children can successfully navigate this difficult life passage, Geri emphasizes. "It is essential to build a mutually respectful, supportive relationship," she told me. "As a caregiver, a daughter can't just assume control over her mother's life – unless, of course, it is medically necessary because the mother has dementia or another medical condition that impairs her decision making ability. Swooping in and taking control undermines the mother's value. The daughter needs to level the playing field by respectfully talking with her mother, understanding her wishes and expectations, her fear and frustrations, and working with her mother to find solutions."

Geri's tips for daughters:

- See your mother as a person in her own right. Maintain open dialogue with her about her wishes and concerns as her abilities and needs change.
- Don't assume you know what is best for your mother.
- Respect your mother's independence even as you care for her.
- Allow your mother to make as many decisions and have as much control as possible, as long as her safety and health are not at risk.

- Have reasonable expectations of what your mother can do independently.
- Make informed decisions that are in the best interests of your mother's health and her needs.
- Provide efficient, responsible care, but keep compassion at the forefront.

"Both mother and daughter need to place themselves in the other's shoes," Geri advises. "When a daughter views the situation from her mother's perspective, her heart will open up to her mother. She will understand how much harder it is to be dependent on your child than to be the busy adult trying to sandwich in a few minutes for your parent."

### **Take care of yourself too**

Caregiving is associated with a high mortality rate. It's easy to see why, with the stress of caregiving added on to all the other stress and responsibilities in an adult woman's life.

"Caregivers need to take care of themselves, too," Geri says. "Recognize when you are getting worn out and take a break. Have realistic expectations of yourself. Don't allow yourself to be caught up in guilt. Enlist the help of other family members and friends, and make use of outside resources and support."

Every Wisconsin county has a department of aging/senior adult services, as well as an Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) that provides information, assistance and education about community services and long term care options. Visit <http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/againg/index.htm>.

Also consider hiring a geriatric care manager. Medicare will usually pay for all or part of these services. A care manager is a nurse, social worker, gerontologist or other specialist who helps assess medical and social service needs, then coordinates assistance to help frail elderly people live as independently as possible. Having someone from outside the family dynamic, who is knowledgeable about aging issues and can bring in needed resources, helps preserve the adult child/parent relationship.

No matter your past relationship or the tricky terrain you are now navigating, these last years should be a time to treasure. Think of your mother as a friend you would like to know better. Talk openly and honestly about the stuff that matters. Help her remain active, involved and vital. Let her know that she is a respected, valued member of the family and the community. Embrace life, celebrate quiet pleasures, and walk this journey hand in hand.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson  
 Founder & President  
 Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

*The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts educational forums that focus on prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF, visit [wwhf.org](http://wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*

## **Sidebar**

### **Helpful books about caring for your elderly parent**

- *Counting on Kindness*, Wendy Lustbader, Free Press, 1993
- *The Complete Eldercare Planner, second edition: Where to Start, Which Questions to Ask, and How to Find Help*, Joy Loverde, Three Rivers Press, 2000