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Keeping Your Marriage Strong While Caring for a Parent

Learn to set boundaries and enlist some extra help

[EN ESPAÑOL](#) |

Fred didn't want to hate his mother-in-law, Sharon. He'd tolerated her — and she, him — for three decades of holiday gatherings, Sunday night dinners and summer barbecues. But after suffering a small stroke a year ago, Sharon had become increasingly dependent on Tiffany, her oldest daughter and Fred's beloved spouse, for nearly everything: rides, errands, meals, companionship, reassurance. All those activities took time — time away from an increasingly irritated Fred.

Tiffany's cellphone rang repeatedly whenever she and Fred came home from work, ate dinner and watched TV. With each new call from Sharon, Tiffany rolled her eyes and Fred groaned in protest, not loudly, though, because he didn't want to make Tiffany angry at him for seeming insensitive. Instead, he just tried to look impatient to hurry her off the phone.

He didn't blame Sharon for having a stroke but was miffed at her anyway for disrupting his marital life. But there was a part of him that was also angry at Tiffany for letting her. He wanted to be a bigger person who was more understanding of his wife's need to help her mom. In his mind, though, a year was a long time to put up with this.

Caregiving tests even the best relationships

The rigors of caregiving can strain all family bonds. The in-law relationship tends to be the weakest link and therefore shows the most duress. The daughter may be devoted to her ailing and lonely mother while the son-in-law, with whom she's had a lukewarm relationship, is ambivalent about the sacrifices he's now being asked to make. Should he hang in there to please his wife? Or should he ask for more for the

marriage and himself? And how does the wife feel about being whipsawed between her allegiances to her mother and her husband? Marriages have foundered on such questions.

How can the in-law relationship be strengthened so the adult child caregiver isn't stuck in the middle, irked at both her parent and her spouse? Here are some ideas.

Learn to balance spousal expectations

The main fight really isn't with the in-law. It's about the differences of perspective and opinion between the spouses. Of course, the adult child feels a greater sense of obligation to the parent than does her partner. But almost all of us have multiple family roles — child, spouse, sibling, parent — and degrees of obligation to each of them that must be balanced. I've heard caregiving adult children say, "My spouse is going to have to wait. This is my parent's time now." That rarely works well, however, unless the period of caregiving is short — days or weeks, not months or years. You can't put your marriage on the shelf indefinitely without repercussions.

Get help with common caregiving conflicts with [AARP's Care Guide](#)

At the outset of caregiving, it's a good idea for the caregiver and spouse to talk this out with three principles in mind: We won't see eye to eye on how much time should be spent on caring for the parent; we need to negotiate a compromise that provides some nurturance for all family members; compromises are not chiseled in stone and should be renegotiated every few months. If Fred and Tiffany can arrive at a mutual understanding about this assuring him he'll get some time with his wife, then he doesn't have to pout whenever she's busy with Sharon.

Set boundaries with your parent

Many of us feel guilty saying no to a parent at any time, let alone when they're hurting. But there's no chance of creating a compromise with a spouse without the parent's cooperation as well. The adult child should have a heart-to-heart with her parent about the need to balance the care she provides for everyone. Others may have to pitch in to help a parent at times when the adult child is committed to others. Hearing this, some parents will feel entitled to more and grumble. Most will understand and, perhaps regretfully, accept the situation.

That means Tiffany should tell Sharon there are realistic limits on her availability. She can't take calls every hour during the evenings when she and Fred are trying to relax. If the mother is lonely or frightened and needs more contact with people at that time of day, then Tiffany can arrange for her siblings or others to help.

Enlist help from your spouse

Many a lukewarm relationship has been made warmer when two people are thrown together in changed circumstances. The adult child is well within her rights to ask her spouse to spend some time with her aging parent. When Tiffany made that request of Fred, he did a double take but then, under his wife's imploring gaze, agreed to stop by Sharon's apartment once a week on his way home from work. Sharon was happier. Fred? Well, he didn't complain.

AARP was founded in 1958 and has over 38 million members. It is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization for people over the age of 50. AARP is well-known for its advocacy efforts, providing its members with important information, products and services that enhance quality of life as they age. They also promote community service and keep members and the public informed on issues relating to the over 50 age group.

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