



Chesapeake Currents

Volume I, Issue 2

Welcome to the second issue of Chesapeake Legal Counsel's newly redesigned e-newsletter, **Chesapeake Currents!** We received some marvelous feedback from the last issue, and hope to keep that momentum going.

As always, if you or those you serve have any questions, we would be happy to hear from you.
Regards,
John F. Robbert



Happy Mother's Day!

On behalf of everyone here at Chesapeake Legal Counsel, we'd like to wish a very happy Mother's Day to all of our clients. Whether we serve you on behalf of your own mother, or cater to your needs as a mother, we are grateful for all that you have done.

Pictured at left, John's mother, Anna Dell Thiac Robbert

Top 3 Excuses From Siblings Who Don't Help With Caregiving



[Carol Bradley Bursack](#)
[AgingCare.com](#)

Unfair as it may seem, even in families of many adult children, one sibling usually becomes the primary caregiver for their aging parents.

In many families, such as mine, this person is the one who lives the closest to the parents and/or is most suited for the task of caregiving. In my case, it was both. This fact didn't keep my sister, who lived about 50 miles away, from coming to town nearly every weekend to visit with our parents and help out. However, in some families, this relatively short distance would be enough of an excuse for some siblings to justifying helping minimally and infrequently.

Many caregivers ask how to respond to siblings who, after being directly and distinctly asked for help, either skirt responsibility with excuses or react nastily to the request. The proper response will depend entirely on the sibling and the nature of the family relationship. Let's look at a few examples and contemplate responses. Perhaps these can inspire other ideas for how to handle your unique circumstances.

Excuse #1: "I Don't Have the Time"

This is probably the most commonly used reason for not pitching in. While it may seem innocent enough at first, this statement implies that you, the primary caregiver, have all the time in the world.

What many non-caregivers do not understand is that this responsibility can grow from running just a few errands each week into a full-time job in the blink of an eye. Primary care providers often have to quit paying jobs, turn down promotions, and miss their kids' events, games, and performances in order to be available to care for an aging parent. These caregivers also place their own wellbeing on the back burner to ensure their care recipient, family and career are not neglected. From the outside, it may look as though caregivers have the time, but in most cases, they have made the time—often at great sacrifice.

Having the time is also relative in that caregiving is physically and emotionally a 24/7 job. All caregivers need a break from the constant stress of being the ONE person responsible for everything. Siblings could provide that relief, either in person or by offering to help pay for respite like in-home care or adult day care. When this option is suggested to siblings, some jump on board but many don't. Those who do not usually offer up excuse number two.

Excuse #2: "I Don't Have the Money"

Let's face it, most caregivers "don't have the money" either. Unless there's a personal care agreement in place, family caregivers usually don't get a salary. That not only affects their current financial status but also their future. Caregivers aren't paying into Social Security if they quit their jobs. Therefore, those of us who have given years to providing care often find our own retirement years woefully underfunded. Yet, many of us stay home from a paying job to care for an elder, thus we appear to "have the money."

It's understandable that most long-distance siblings cannot provide regular hands-on care and respite. It's costly and time consuming to travel, so visits are probably rare. However, there are still ways that family members can contribute from afar. Let's say you have a brother in a distant state who says he'd be happy to help out financially, but he just doesn't have the money.

Maybe he's being honest. But there are nonmonetary ways he can contribute. The key issue here is whether he actually wants to. He can take over some of the bookkeeping tasks that suck time from your day or handle Medicare issues and other health insurance decisions. He can help you research financial assistance programs and potential senior living options. Contributing to smaller purchases and even scheduling a twice weekly phone call with your parent can even be helpful. Internet research and digital communication make it easy for siblings to pitch in, regardless of where they live.

Do your best to suggest ideas and alternatives that "mesh" best with your sibling's schedule and budget. Getting them to agree to something small initially will make it easier to recruit their help with larger requests as your parent's care needs increase. Growing frustrated with a brother or sister and making demands may only breed tension and discourage them from getting involved.

Excuse #3: "I Can't Bear to See Mom/Dad Like That"

This last excuse is very common, especially in situations where a parent has been diagnosed with a progressive illness like dementia. It is undeniably difficult to watch someone you love decline, but it isn't fair to assume that it is any easier for a caregiver to witness it firsthand. You accompany them to doctor's appointments, give them their medications and help them with everything, including very intimate activities of daily living.

If anyone knows how painful aging can be, it's primary caregivers. The first time I took my dad to the bathroom is branded on my brain. I was sick over the thought that he'd find the process humiliating. Thank God, it didn't seem to bother him, but it was very hard on me. This is what caregivers go through daily. Interestingly enough, many siblings who cite this excuse for not being more involved have not even experienced helping their parents bathe, use the toilet or eat.

Please don't misunderstand me. Most of us are honored to be able to help our elders through these difficulties. It's the sadness of coping with their decline that causes our pain, especially when we feel alone in experiencing it. Don't our siblings understand that we can't bear to see Mom or Dad like this either? Probably not. Maybe we are just braver than they are. Maybe we are just more dutiful. Maybe we are just, well, put on the spot. Whatever the reason, we step up to the plate and do what is required. If we're uncomfortable, we do it

anyway. Sometimes pointing this out to an uninvolved sibling can get the message across, while other times it can provoke anger and cause them to become defensive.

Be Direct With Requests for Help

So, how do we work past these excuses? Start by reflecting on your communication with your sibling(s). Many primary caregivers mistakenly assume that implied requests or subtle hints regarding assistance should be sufficient for siblings to realize that they should step up. Unfortunately, though, this is rarely effective. If you have a sibling who you feel is not contributing to Mom or Dad's care, it's important to consider if you have made direct requests and given them a chance to help. It can be very difficult for someone on the "outside" who has never cared for an elder before to understand and anticipate a caregiver's or senior's needs. Some uninvolved siblings complain that they don't feel in the loop regarding their parents' care, and this does happen. You don't want to be the one who is indirectly hindering their involvement. In my opinion, a caregiver who never directly asks for help forfeits the right to complain about unaccommodating siblings.

Surely, your brother or sister should be able to empathize with your frustrations and put two and two together to realize you can't do this on your own. But, many siblings need a bit of a kick in the pants to act on it. This is where clarity, preparation and delivery are crucial.

Sit down and create a list of realistic tasks or objectives that your sibling can help with. This way, you will have a slew of different ideas prepared for when you speak with them about pitching in. Whether you talk on the phone, via email or in person, be very direct about what you are seeking. Don't mince your words. Tell them that, "Mom/Dad and I really need your help. Are you willing to step up and contribute?" If they say yes, have your first idea at the ready and make it very specific.

If this task involves time, but they do not have any to spare, then suggest a less time-consuming idea or request a specific (but reasonable) amount of money for someone else to cover one of these tasks instead. If none of these ideas work, then ask them what they can contribute. Try to be flexible. Coming away with even a tiny amount of help is better than getting angry and continuing to wear yourself out by do everything on your own. You may need to speak a few times to brainstorm together and come to an agreement on what would be useful, how it will be taken care of and when, etc.

Don't forget to be gracious if your sibling is receptive to taking on a more active role in caring for your parent(s). Trying to work together to find solutions can be frustrating and downright infuriating at times, but it's important to make sure they feel appreciated. It will help communicate how badly you need their assistance.

If your siblings are truly interested and they honestly can't provide any hands-on time or money, it's important to still keep them updated on your life as a caregiver and your parent's health status. This may work to your advantage if their schedule or financial situation change or they come to the realization that they should be doing more for the family. The latter doesn't happen often, but it is feasible.

What to Do If Direct Requests Don't Work

If you've used all the approaches explained above and either get brushed off or told off, where do you go from here? Ignoring their lack of interest and involvement doesn't change the fact that you need backup. Ultimately, how you proceed is entirely up to you. I'll share with you one example of how a caregiver I know handled this unfortunate situation.

This woman sent me a copy of a letter she had written to her siblings. In the letter, she expressed that she had tried very hard to let them participate in helping their parents through their last years. She reiterated the requests she'd made many times before and said she accepted their denial. She then politely informed them that she would no longer ask for their help. She offered her condolences to her siblings for all that they were missing out on during these years and for the regrets they may have later on. She explained that she chose to help their parents and looked forward to living a life of peace after their passing. She signed off lovingly.

This woman then moved on. She had gotten these difficult feelings off her chest and accepted her reality as a caregiver. It was up to her to seek out other sources of help. She conducted her research, connected with national and local organizations that help caregivers, and found ways to get affordable respite. This woman made it through without her siblings. She chose to let go of her anger and change her situation to include assistance. I believed her when she said she was the only one in her family that felt at peace after her parents passed away. She knew that she had done what was right to the best of her ability.

Each caregiver must know when to fight and when to give up the battle and move on. There is no right or wrong time. It's up to you.