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By Cathy Lynn Grossman

Advice on working with your siblings when caregiving

Expert observers of heroic efforts — and horrific fights — among siblings and their aging parents offer pragmatic advice on how to face the challenges and still be friends.

First: Never promise that you will not put a parent in a nursing home.

"Conditions can deteriorate to where you can't provide this care, your siblings can't, and the guilt and recriminations are overwhelming," says the Rev. John Paris, an ethicist at Boston College.

Geriatric care manager Rona Bartelstone of Fort Lauderdale suggests that siblings together tell their parent:

"We know you want to stay home, and we want that for you as well, but something may happen that could make that impossible. We will always try to be sure you have the best care you can for your needs."

More guidance for siblings:

- Each should evaluate what one can reasonably, honestly do, Bartelstone says. "

Will the burdens be disproportionate? Probably so. Talk about this and raise questions: Given my circumstances, how can I help? Money, respite care? Financial management?"

- Put care plans and financial agreements in writing, particularly if anyone is absent from conversations.

Share copies with everyone and plan to revisit the plans as circumstances change.

- "Never criticize what the caregiver is doing," says Patricia Burnette of Apopka, Fla., whose sister lives with their ailing mother in Michigan. "Offer financial or emotional help, but don't second-guess. This caretaker is sacrificing her life to do this."

- The sibling caregiver must keep everyone up to date on the parent's condition.

"If you don't, the consequences will be doubly painful. When siblings fly into a crisis scene unaware of incremental disability, functional losses and cognitive losses," they'll be shocked and angry and argue with the caregiver, Bartelstone says.

- Don't expect a sibling to see your parent as you do.

"You're affected by how each of you related to the parent growing up, your birth order, the financial status of the family during your youth, whether there were serial marriages or yours was a blended family," Bartelstone says.