

Who's the parent now?

They've cared for you all your life, but what happens when the time comes for your parents to need support from you? **Rosie Ifould** investigates the potential role-reversal that can take place as families grow older

Fion recalls a memory from her childhood. 'The first time I saw my father cry, I was eight years old, and I remember it more clearly than anything else about being eight,' she says. 'It was his birthday, and we'd hired a boat for a day trip. I didn't know it at the time, but my parents were about to separate, so I guess they were both feeling pretty fragile already. The day was absolutely awful. It rained, my younger brother was being a nightmare and then dad crashed the boat, meaning we'd lose our deposit. I thought he'd lose his temper, but he just sat down and cried. I felt sick – it was so much worse than him getting angry.'

Our parents are people too. Of course, we all know that, but there are times when the reminder is like an emotional punch to the stomach. Whether you're eight, or 48, nothing can prepare you for the sight of your mother or father in tears, or looking scared, or in need of help. It can be seen as a rite of passage, the moment when our parents are revealed to us as human, rather than the superhuman characters of early childhood who can make everything OK.

But it can also be the moment when our closest relationships are reconfigured for ever. 'We like constancy,' points out psychotherapist Sherilyn Thompson. 'We like knowing who we are, who are parents are, what they represent.' Any suggestion that >>>



>>> perhaps our parents aren't quite the people we thought they were can throw up all sorts of issues.'

'When I was 17, I found my mum's diary,' says Aaliyah. 'I was your classic angry teen and we'd been fighting a lot, so I think I wanted to read her diary just to spite her really. She'd written all about how much I'd hurt her – she wrote that I'd broken her heart. Until then, I'd had no idea that she could get hurt by anything I did.'

Facing facts

Increasing numbers of us are also looking at a time when we might have to parent one or both of our parents. With divorce rates rising in the over-60s, we may find ourselves offering relationship counselling or a spare bed for the night (or the foreseeable future) to a parent. We might begin to worry that they can't cope financially. Or, with healthcare experts predicting a sharp rise in the number of dementia sufferers, we may find ourselves in the heartbreaking position of having to cope with the demands of a parent who has returned to a very painful kind of second childhood.

Whatever the situation we find ourselves in, it's likely to bring with it a maelstrom of unpredictable emotions. 'It's such an impossible subject to get your head around,' says psychotherapist Wendy Bristow. 'There can be huge resentment even as you're trying to help your parent. At the same time, it can be incredibly painful to see them suffering. If you're caring for a very ill parent, you may find that there's a kind of anticipatory grieving – you're already beginning to feel the loss of the parent you knew and loved.'

'It was actually when my grandmother died that things changed between me and my mum,' recalls Katja. 'I'd been away at university, so I hadn't been there for a lot of that final illness and I was shocked by how my

mum went to pieces after the funeral. She left her job and I remember having long phonecalls into the night with her about how directionless she felt – the same kind of conversations we'd been having in reverse a few months before. I thought, I can't handle this, I'm supposed to be your child. Who's looking after *me*? Even though I knew that she was grieving, part of me resented her being so helpless.'

Katja thinks that having such a close relationship with her mother while growing up made it harder to cope when their roles were reversed, but, as Sherilyn Thompson says, it can be equally hard for people who didn't have a good relationship with their parents. 'If you developed what's

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known as an 'avoidant detachment' style – where your parent wasn't as available to you as a child – you might have developed an attitude of 'I'm OK, I can survive without them'. Then when you find yourself in a situation where you're looking after them, it can trigger resentment. And sometimes that can then generate guilt – 'Why can't I feel closer to them? Why isn't this coming naturally for me?'

Thompson points out that with this kind of relationship dynamic, it may

also be particularly difficult for the parents to accept your help. 'If they encouraged a lot of independence in their child, it could be because they prize self-sufficiency, so then to have a child who might need to be more involved in their care could make them feel as if they have really compromised their sense of self.'

At almost the other end of the spectrum are the parents who have typically been over-protective and always available to their children, which can

create what's known as an 'anxious ambivalent' attachment style. 'For the children of these parents, not only does the thought of their parents changing represent a huge threat, but they feel very obligated towards their parents,' says Thompson.

'My parents divorced when I was 32 and, ironically, a few months after I'd got married,' recalls Marina. 'My dad had an affair, so I was naturally more sympathetic towards my mum. I invited her to move in with us while she

got sorted out, which was OK for the first couple of weeks, but it was a lot harder than I imagined it would be. Mum was in the house all the time, she called me at work constantly, wanting to know when I'd be home and what we'd want to eat, then my evenings were colonised by her problems.'

Support network

In everyday life you might not think about your relationship with your parents in terms of your attachment style,

but understanding those different styles can help explain why there's often conflict with other people in our lives when our parents change. 'My husband was so frustrated with the way I handled it,' continues Marina. 'He has a very different relationship with his mum; he's much more independent and couldn't understand why I couldn't confront her. I couldn't understand why he wasn't more sympathetic and supportive. It wasn't until we went to relationship counselling >>>



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>>> that I understood that he felt in competition with her for my attention.'

Family ties

It's not just our partners who are affected by these changes. If you have children, the sudden dependency of a parent might feel as if you've got an extra kid to look after. You may find yourself pulling back from friends or work to find the time to cope with your new demands. 'And, of course, your parents never become vulnerable at a really convenient time in your life,' Wendy Bristow wryly points out.

But it's our very oldest bonds that are often the most severely tested – not just with our parents, but with our siblings. 'When families face stress, they revert to old patterns,' says Sherilyn Thompson. Many people find they fall into unspoken roles, with one brother or sister acting as the chief guardian to their parent – which inevitably leads to resentment from the one who feels they're doing it all or the one who feels excluded. 'When Dad died, my oldest brother organised the funeral,' says Sue. 'Mum was relieved at first, but then we both realised that he wasn't prepared to listen to us about any of the arrangements. It was like Mum and I were his little sisters who weren't adult enough to have an opinion. It was so frustrating.'

It's easy to get caught up in the tangle of old family ties, and feel as if our world has turned upside down. *The New Yorker* cartoonist Roz Chast wrote a book about the last years of her parents' lives, entitled *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (Bloomsbury, £18.99). And that's the truth of it – we don't want to think about it, let alone talk about it or face the reality that one day, we will be orphaned. The subject is so taboo that we find it hard to confront the feelings it brings up. (Chast has spoken about discovering how much money her parents had saved. 'There I am thinking,

'Oh my God, \$14,000 a month. I could have had that money'. And then you think, "God, I'm disgusting".')

Healthy outcome

But in some cases, caring for a parent can also bring a kind of redemption. 'My father had been extremely strict when I was a child,' says Anna. 'He was older, and I was always jealous of my friends who had much younger, cooler parents. When I left home, I moved to France for about 10 years, and Dad and I barely spoke. After my mum died, he

got ill, so I moved back to the UK to help care for him. It was tough – at first he still treated me like a rebellious teenager and we had a few fights, but there were also days when we would just sit in the garden, listening to the radio together, and we'd both laugh at the same joke on *Just A Minute*. We became friends. Now he's gone, but it's those moments I think of, that we might have missed out on, and I'm grateful for what we had.'

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Wendy Bristow: wendybristowpsychotherapy.co.uk

CARING FOR YOURSELF WHEN YOU'RE CARING FOR OTHERS

1 'Be aware of all the knock-on effects that taking on a caring role can have,' says Sherilyn Thomas. Are you getting the support you need from other people? It might not be obvious to the other people in your life, such as your partner or your colleagues, so don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it.

2 'Don't try to chivy your parents out of the feelings they have,' says Wendy Bristow. It can be very tempting to get them to 'buck up', because it's frightening for us to see them in distress, but they may need to express their own fear, anger or anxiety.

3 'Honour the feelings that you have,' says Thomas, even if they're feelings of anger or resentment towards your parents. 'It's natural to feel all of these things, but sometimes when people experience them, it adds to the guilt. It's not about reacting to

these feelings, but being kind to yourself if you do have them – it's completely normal.'

4 When a crisis hits, it's a common reaction to go into superwoman mode. 'It's a way of shoving down all your feelings,' says Bristow. But while it's important that the practical side is dealt with, it's also important to make the time just to talk to your mum or dad. What you want for them might not be what they want, so if possible, says Bristow, 'have a conversation along the lines of: "What do you want from me and how can I help you with this?"'

5 If you have siblings, talk to them. You can be each others' support. It's also a very good idea to think about the responsibilities each of you has towards your parents, and to make sure that no-one feels as if they're either shouldering all the burden or, conversely, being left out.