

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white lab coat, is looking directly at the camera. She is holding a white rectangular box with both hands in front of her chest. In her mouth, she is holding a medical syringe horizontally. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

ROLE REVERSAL

WATCHING YOUR MOM GET
OLD IS TOUGH, BUT HOW DO
YOU THEN COPE WITH HAVING
TO BECOME A PARENT TO YOUR
PARENT? BY KIRSTY WILKINS

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imagine asking your mom where she lives and she can't remember. Or listening to her repeat the same story with different facts each time. Although it's a part of life, witnessing your mom get on in years will never be easy. 'People live longer today than ever before. As a result, many adult children find themselves taking care of their ageing parents,' says Cape Town-based clinical psychologist Joelene Conradie. One of the most significant challenges with this is that there is a reversal of roles.

Lara De Villiers*, 59, has watched her 90-year-old mother suffer from Alzheimer's and lose her memory. 'She changed from her motherly role of being concerned about others to being wrapped up in her own inability to cope with life. The hardest part was coming to terms with this,' she says.

Joelene confirms that denial is often another common hurdle. 'It's natural to not want to admit your parents are declining in any way. But the sooner you acknowledge the truth, the sooner you can explore your options.' For Lara, it became easier once she accepted that her mother is not the same person she knew growing up. 'Instead, I have learnt to love who she has become.'

FINDING A MIDDLE GROUND

For the parent, it is the loss of self-sufficiency that becomes a source of conflict. 'My mom is missing her role as homemaker terribly and desperately wants to be able to do the simple things in life, such as make a cup of tea or clean her home,' says Lara. According to Leatia Stemmet, a psychologist in Joburg, doing things in the usual, set ways and resisting support is a way to hang on to a their former, independent life.

On the other hand, the adult child may experience mixed feelings about their new role as carer. 'It involves love and nurturing, but may also result in irritability, frustration and anger,' says Joelene. 'If these feelings aren't channelled in the right way, it may lead to additional conflict between the grown child and their ageing parent.'

Lara says that taking care of her mom often feels like she is raising a child. 'I have to choose my battles. Getting angry doesn't help either of us. If the issue isn't important, I need to let it go. If it is important, I have to find a way for her to agree, even if it means compromising. It's essential to give her the dignity she deserves while still making decisions that are in her best interest.'

Many children also do not live with-in travelling distance of their parents. 'This increases stress and anxiety, as you can't see first-hand how they are doing,' says Joelene. Expecting your mom to move closer could prove to be a sore point, particularly if they are resistant. 'Not too long ago, my dad dislocated his hip and had to spend a night in hospital. My mother couldn't stay alone, so I chose to stay at her place to minimise her distress,' says Lara.

TAKING ACTION

Before you make any decisions about your elderly parent, discuss the various options with everyone involved. Be realistic about your expectations and honest about the potential limitations. 'Tell your parents about the different services and options available, so they can make an informed decision. Also encourage them to discuss sensitive issues, such as disability and nursing homes,' says Leatia.

If your mom doesn't want to pass on the responsibility to you, negotiate with them. 'Turn her involvement into a conversation. For example, if there's an issue about you having to make meals, ask her how she used to do it. This will validate the life she lived and the way you cook will cease to be a threat,' says Leatia.

KEEPING A BALANCE

Despite what you may be going through with your mom, it's vital to set aside time for yourself and your spouse. 'The added responsibility of

caring for a parent can put a strain on your health, marriage, relationship with your children, job and financial security,' Joelene says. 'Don't become too involved with your mom's day-to-day activities at the expense of your own independence. Watch out for signs you may be burnt out, such as extreme exhaustion, irritability or lack of concentration.'

Also try to put yourself in your mom's shoes – ask yourself how you'd feel in the same situation. We are all apprehensive about losing independence or becoming physically weak. 'Each of us has a deep fear of getting old and about whether or not we have adequately made provision for our old age,' Leatia says.

'By realising these dynamics in ourselves, it's easier to understand the emotional process of ageing in our parents.' ■

*Name has been changed.

What are the options?

- **Old-age homes** Your mom will have the opportunity to make new friends and get involved in activities. It can be costly, but all her needs will be taken of.
- **Private home care** This can be an additional financial burden for you, and it could lead to your mom feeling isolated as she may often rely on others to visit her. On the plus side, there will be individual care.
- **Staying with you** Having a parent live with you is a huge responsibility, particularly if you need to care for her. The bonus, though, is that your kids will be able to get to know their a grandparent.

Get in touch

- **Joelene Conradie**
joelene.conradie@gmail.com
- **Leatia Stemmet**
leatia@jmdpsych.com