Who Takes Care of Mom?
Siblings clash as they respond to parents’ aging

BY FRANCINE RUSSO

When my mother’s health was failing, I was the “bad” sister who lived far away and wasn’t involved. My sister helped my parents. She never asked me to do anything and I didn’t volunteer. I was widowed, raising kids and working, but that wasn’t really why I kept to weekly calls and short, infrequent visits. I was stuck in my adolescent role as the aloof achiever, defending myself from my judgmental mother and other family craziness. As always, I deflected my sister’s digs about my not being around more—and I didn’t hear her rising desperation. It wasn’t until my mom’s funeral, watching my dad and sister cling to each other and weep, that I got a hint of their long ordeal—and how badly I’d screwed up.

My sister was so furious, she barely spoke to me during my mother’s memorial service, which ended right before a storm! So I was the last to leave the church. The next day I couldn’t bear to look her in the eye, but she was still there, no longer able to ignore me. That was the last time we were alone, and we hugged, wept and talked all night about my mother and our childhood. It was the beginning of a new chapter, despite the long separation and many years of neglect.

Mixed messages. Linda Grechler, 65, always ignored her problems until a daughter visited her in Baltimore.
STUDIES SHOW:

AGE:
Daughters are more likely than sons to become caregivers, and among daughters, geographic proximity rules.

FAMILY DYNAMICS:
Siblings are the greatest source of help to caregivers, but they're also the biggest source of inter-personal stress.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
Recollections of maltreatment during childhood outweigh perceptions of current favoritism in predicting tension among adult siblings.

by her medications. "Tracey would say, 'You have no idea what this is like.'" Groebler recalls. "Within a couple of weeks of moving in, I said to her, 'You're right. I had no idea.'"

Not all siblings fight, and some become closer during their parents' twilight years. The Heatons managed this period better than most. After years of arguing with their five far-flung kids, in 2000 the parents moved from Boise, Idaho, to an assisted living facility in Eugene, Ore., 10 minutes from Jeanne Walker, the daughter who has had the best relationship with their often difficult mother. At 98, Walker works part-time as a nurse. Her older brother helps out twice a week, and their three siblings, who live in other states, spend their vacations on parent duty. When her mom complains unpleasantly, Walker calls her siblings to vent. "It makes a difference to me to feel I have their support," she says.

Research shows that emotional support for caregivers is critical to their well-being and to family harmony. Too often, anger on one side leads to guilt and defensiveness on the other, resulting in sibling gridlock. Sometimes a third party or caregiver needs to referee family meetings. For status updates, Patricia Muller, a geriatric-care manager in New York, favors simultaneous emails. "That way," she says, "Sue and I won't hear it before Joe, and that can reduce tension."

As far as I'm concerned, I became more present for my father in his last years. After he died, I apologized to my sister. And so, in my imperfect way, we remain "family." And sometimes I laugh over a childhood memory that now that our parents are gone, we are the only people on earth who share.