

Late-life remarriage: Stepfamilies make caring more complex

June 25 2008

Late-life remarriage complicates caring for an ailing spouse, according to a University of Michigan researcher who is conducting one of the first known studies to focus on the challenges facing older remarried caregivers---a growing segment of the older U.S. population.

"I felt so insulted and so hurt. It was like [their father] had met some gal at a bar and married her the next day, and she wanted all his money. I felt they didn't give me any credit, or any respect, appreciation or anything. It still hurts." --Remarried wife of 12 years, caring for husband with Alzheimer's disease, about her adult stepchildren

"Caring for an aging spouse is extremely difficult under the best of circumstances," said researcher Carey Wexler Sherman. "When stepfamily tensions and conflicts are added to the mix, the stress can become overwhelming."

With funding from the national Alzheimer's Association, Sherman plans to interview about 125 men and women with the goal of documenting the type, level and quality of social support received from step-children and other social network members, and assessing how late-life remarriage affects the experience of caregiving.

"Past research and current public policy relies heavily on the assumption that most older people who develop dementia are in long-term, intact marriages where the spouses---most often the wife---and adult children will provide most of their care," said Sherman, a research investigator at

the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR). "It's not clear exactly how late-life remarriage and stepfamily relationships affect the spouse's ability to get meaningful help in providing that care.

"Sometimes remarried partners and adult stepchildren come to consider each other 'family,' and sometimes they don't," she said. "Often you hear people talk about 'my father's wife' or 'my husband's children'---which can be a sign that a family hasn't really blended. Ambivalent feelings among family members may carry over in all kinds of ways when a stepparent needs help providing care for an aging parent."

An adult child of remarried parents herself, Sherman believes that her personal experience as well as her doctorate in family psychology and gerontology has helped to inform her approach to this difficult subject.

"When my father needed care, I saw how challenging it can be to negotiate medical and care decisions when you are working within a stepfamily context. I was fortunate that my stepmom and I were able to become partners in that process," she said. "But among the older remarried women I've interviewed, there is often a feeling that they are not accepted by their adult stepchildren. Many also report that they either get little or no help from stepchildren, or that the stepchildren challenge the decisions or choices made by the caregiver."

In a prior qualitative study of late-life remarried caregivers, based on her doctorate dissertation, Sherman explored the financial tensions and conflicts between stepparents and adult stepchildren. In a paper forthcoming in the journal *Family Relations*, she noted that adult stepchildren often resisted the stepparent's financial role, even going so far as to "reclaim ownership" of family furniture, heirlooms and other objects when their biological parent and stepparent were away from home.

"Commonly, old family and financial grievances get revisited when a parent becomes ill," Sherman said. "And the onset of dementia in the biological parent leaves the caregiving spouse and stepparent on the 'front line' to deal with any unresolved or contentious issues."

Source: University of Michigan

Citation: Late-life remarriage: Stepfamilies make caring more complex (2008, June 25) retrieved 5 May 2024 from

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