

YOU ARE ONLY AS HAPPY AS YOUR LEAST HAPPY CHILD

The topic for this month's Medical Minute is parental anxiety. Specifically, feeling worried about adult children. Most parents don't need an article to tell them they lose sleep worrying about their kids when they are young, but research has shown many older adults with grown children also find themselves awake and worried. Research shows that stress is related to the amount of involvement and type of support parents give to their adult children. These worries lead to both health and quality of life issues for the parents if they have lost a sense of control over their own environment, emotions, and behaviour.

At Affiliated Clinical Services, Inc. we often meet with older parents who are struggling with their concerns or demands placed upon them by their adult children. They find themselves doing things they are not comfortable with such as: giving money, cars, a place to live, making basic appointments, and more for children in their twenties, thirties, and even older. While this is understandable when an adult child has a serious mental or physical disability, it is often the case that these children are capable or may have a self-induced problem such as alcohol/drugs, gambling, or just lack of motivation and drive.

In some situations the parents feel taken advantage of, especially if the adult child is in the family home. Even if the adult child is helpful around the house

and pleasant to be with, they know it is not age appropriate for them to be taking care of an adult as if they were still an adolescent. At worst, they may feel afraid if the child is verbally disrespectful or physically threatening them. There are times parents fear for their lives and sleep with locks on the bedroom doors. So why do we let this happen and what can we do?

Even when our children have launched and are living their independent lives by working, having adult relationships, and making their own decisions we worry when they are not happy. Of course, if a loved one is sick or in a bad situation we worry. They are our family and we hurt when they hurt. But, it is almost harder when our children are just anxious, depressed, or unhappy in their current situation and they share this with us. We cannot solve their problems but we certainly lay awake at night wondering how they are doing. We worry because we have an intimate bond with them. We gave birth to them, we raised them and invested greatly in them. We might feel a bit like a failure if they are not succeeding. We feel that terrible helplessness because we cannot make it better like we did when they were small.

When we give in to our anxiety and need to "make it all better", things deteriorate if we invite them to move home, bail them out of situations, and enable them to feel they need us to protect them rather than encourage them to face challenges and make

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tough decisions. This may be an act of love, but in the end it leads to resentment on all sides.

What we can do for our children is to make sure we are taking care of ourselves. Seek healthy support from friends and family who are objective. Be sure we are eating and exercising and doing things we enjoy. Empathise with our children, but remember they will feel uncomfortable until they face their realities and make positive decisions to change for themselves. Invite them dinner, offer guidance if they are applying for jobs, going back to school, consolidating loans etc. Remind them of their attributes and, if all else fails, help them enter therapy and consider it yourself.

The therapists at Affiliated Clinical Services have very positive results with families with adult children. It might be just the ticket if you are finding yourself awake all night wondering if little Johnny (aged 33) is okay.