

# PROMOTING POSITIVE SOLUTIONS

**QUESTION:** *I am 81 and my wife, a polio survivor is 80. We are both in relatively good health, but it is more and more difficult to keep up with our day-to-day activities. I worry about what will happen to my wife when I die, or to me when she dies. The future looks very lonely. Our children (in their 50s) do what they can to help us and we have modified our home to make it more convenient. But, it still is too much. I would like your advice on how to approach this with my son and two daughters and their spouses, all of whom seem to have ideas about what is best for us.*

**Response from Rhoda Olkin, PhD:**

Let me address the issues for you and your wife. My colleague will address how it might look from the perspective of your offspring.

Much of what rightly concerns you is common to people as they age and is not unique to polio survivors. Nonetheless, the issues may be somewhat amplified by limitations associated with polio. It is fortunate your overall health is good, and long may that continue to be the case! However, you still have to plan for diminishing capabilities.

You say that everyone seems to have ideas about what is best for you. I understand how that can feel like pressure and sometimes as if people are not helping you figure out what you want. You and your wife have to decide.



Rhoda Olkin, PhD

**Dr. Rhoda Olkin** is a Distinguished Professor of Clinical Psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Francisco, as well as the Executive Director of the Institute on Disability and Health Psychology.

She is a polio survivor and single mother of two grown children.

Here are several questions to address:

- (1) Do you want to stay in your home until the end? If so, let everyone know that.
- (2) Would you have someone come live with either of you if the other were to die?
- (3) Is there an elder community/agency that will arrange to give you a phone call every day to check on you?
- (4) Can you afford to hire more help?
- (5) Have you made end-of-life decisions together, and each is clear what the other wants?
- (6) If one of you outlives the other, would that person be able to and want to go live with your son or one of your daughters?
- (7) Do you have a life alert system or would you get one?
- (8) Are you able to ask for help, or is it hard for you to do so? When people offer, do you give them specific tasks to do?

You seem concerned about loneliness, and you are wise to pay attention to this. Socialization is one key to longevity and happiness. Research consistently underscores the importance of social support and social activity. Unfortunately, as we age we lose friends to aging, incapacity or demise. So now, while you are both in good health, increase your social activities. Make dates to go to movies; join or start a book club; have weekly meals with other people; take a class (art, scrapbooking, computer skills, cooking); take tai chi (excellent for balance – my mother, who had polio when I did, and is now 88, finds that she can do tai chi and feels better when she does); sit outside (being in nature tends to make people feel better); throw a neighborhood pot luck; host a neighborhood watch organizational meeting; go to ‘meetup.com’ to find others who like to do things you like to do. The point is that you have to work at it – friends develop from shared history and time, so start making new friends now.

Will you or your wife be sad when one of you dies? Of course! There is no antidote for the heartache of losing a partner of many years. But the more support you build now, the better it will be for the remaining spouse. This will ease the minds of your children as well, if they know you are busy and have friends.

**Response from Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD:**

As the daughter of a polio survivor, what I wanted most (and received least) was information about my parents' needs as they aged. They were fiercely independent and reluctant to burden us even with information about their health. It has been my experience that most polio survivors are like this. We as children often respond by being reluctant to intrude and believing that you don't need or want our help. In the absence of real information we may draw our own conclusions, which can involve stereotypes of what some archetypal "old person" needs.

There is a tendency, reinforced by the media and society at large, for children to think they should be the ones in charge when parents get older. However, unless both of you are declared incompetent, there is no reason for them to be. No matter what your children think is "best" for you, you and your wife are the ones who should decide. While you want input and possibly assistance from your children, remember that you have a right to live as you wish. That being said, if what you want is more support or to move in with your children now or if you are widowed (or if this is what your wife wants), you may have to sacrifice some independence and control.

Before you approach your children, you and your wife should discuss your needs and wishes. It might be useful to take notes so you have something to refer to and perhaps to give to your children

for reference. Think about what you need now as well as what your needs might be in the future. Clarify what you do and don't want. Obtain information about options that interest you and/or your wife. Remember that whatever you choose as a couple, each of you may want different things later as a surviving spouse. You might find it helpful consult with elder law experts and/or agencies or individuals who do elder care planning.

Once you have clarified your wishes, set a time to meet with your children (and, if appropriate, grandchildren). If possible, this shouldn't be on a holiday or other emotion-laden occasion. Everyone involved should be there so that information is conveyed as you want it to be. If distance prohibits this, you might want to consider using technology such as Skype so that everyone has the same information. Set ground rules for how the meeting will go, especially if you know that one or more of your children will have difficulty listening.

Be clear about what is happening now with your health and daily lives. Directly and nondefensively state your needs and wishes. Be open to questions. Let them know that this meeting is the beginning of a dialogue about your needs, and then keep the lines of communication open.

The more honest you are, the more comfortable your children will be with your choices. Remember that you are providing them (and their children) with a model for positive aging! ■



Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD

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Her father was a polio survivor.