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Boomers face caring for aging stepparents

BY CLAIRE LANDES ALTSCHULER

Three years after Lois McGee lost her mother to lung cancer, her stepfather became ill. McGee, 51, frequently made the six-hour drive from her home in Barrington to Minneapolis to take care of him. Although he wasn't her biological parent, she believed it was the right thing to do.

As the baby boom generation moves into middle age, many of them face the difficulties of caring for sick and aging parents. And high rates of divorce and remarriage mean that a growing number of adult children also will be confronting the medical needs of stepparents. According to the Stepfamily Association of America, more than half of all Americans have been, or eventually will be, part of a stepfamily.

But, while most adult children feel an obligation to provide care for their biological parents, the same is not always true with stepparents. In fact, according to Julie Clawson, chair and professor of nursing at Central Missouri State University and an expert on families, most adult children feel little obligation to care for their stepparents. Whether they do depends on several factors.

One of the most important consid-



Lois McGee: The right thing to do.

PHOTOGRAPH: JEFF SCORING

erations is the stage at which a stepparent comes into the child's life. "If you were a young child (when the stepparent joined the family), you would feel more obligation to take care of them because they had taken care of you," says Clawson.

Other factors, she says, include the belief that family members should take care of each other, gratitude for the love and care a stepparent gave to the adult child's biological parent and a general sense of moral obligation to care for someone who's helpless or ill.

All of these factors, of course, can vary as circumstances change. Karin Finley, 43, of Blue Springs, Mo., says she doesn't anticipate a need to take care of her stepmother, who is still in good health. Her father remarried in 1990, three years after his divorce from Finley's mother.

She explains that her stepmother has both younger siblings and a biological son who live nearby and would be the logical ones to care for her. But if they weren't there and Finley was needed, she says, she'd be willing to

help her stepmother.

Unlike other kinship ties, the stepchild-stepparent bond is "very dependent on what that relationship (has been) like over the years," says Constance Ahrons, professor emerita at the University of Southern California and author of "We're Still Family: What Grown Children Have to Say About Their Parents' Divorce."

Lois McGee's experience shows how the relationship can evolve. She made trips to Minneapolis to care for her stepfather, Roger Derby, 83, even though she hadn't felt particularly close to him in the early stages of their relationship. Years later, when her mother fell ill, McGee spent time with him as they both cared for her mother—strengthening the bond between them. So, later, when his health failed, caring for him "seemed like the natural thing to do," she says.

The tie formed with stepparents is usually weaker than that with biological parents. Stepchildren of both sexes

tend to feel closer to stepfathers than to stepmothers, says Ahrons.

She explains that, in contrast to biological mothers, stepmothers frequently don't play a large role in their stepchildren's lives. Often, they don't even live with their stepchildren, unless the biological mother has died at a relatively young age or is absent.

Biological mothers are "the kin-keepers," Ahrons says. They "keep the family together (by tending to) the interpersonal relationships."

More often, a stepfather lives with the biological mother and her children, and provides financial support for the family. Under these circumstances, children are more likely to develop a bond with the stepfather, especially if they were very young when he came into their lives. This closeness may play itself out later, when the stepfather needs care.

Dr. Ronald Wynne, a Washington, D.C., family psychologist, says there can be advantages to being cared for

by a stepchild. Stepchildren often "come at (caregiving) with a lot less baggage" than biological children.

Wynne is frequently appointed by the Washington, D.C., Superior Court to help resolve probate disputes. He says he's seen "every imaginable kind of family, in every kind of . . . situation." In one recent case, a wealthy man's biological children had unresolved issues with their late father. But the man's stepchildren saw him "as this warm, cuddly guy," he says. They "really loved" him.

June Ninnemann, branch manager of SeniorBridge, a national provider of elder care services, agrees. When a stepchild provides home care, she says, "it's usually a little simpler because of that lack of family history." In many cases, "there's often an extreme closeness and a desire to do (their) best."

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