

# Coping with the Guilt of Putting a Parent in a Nursing Home

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## Background

One of the consequences of the ageing population in Switzerland is the placement of an elderly and dependent parent in a nursing home. Among relatives, children are the majority in the decision to place their parent in Institution (69%). In Switzerland, as all over the world, children are the primary caregivers of parents. Only a few studies have looked at adult children after their parents' nursing home placement.

## Research Question

Our study aims to describe the guilt feelings of adult children after the placement in a nursing home of a parent.

## Research Design

### Theoretical Background

Following the objective of the study, a qualitative phenomeno-pragmatic approach was chosen. We conducted semi-structured interviews.

The realization of the interview guide whose main components are feelings, space-time, family (parents/fraternity), past biographical events, entry into the nursing home, finitude, personal identity.

### Sample

Practically, we interviewed 10 adult children (7 women and 3 men) who had experienced the nursing home placement of one of their parents.

### Type of analysis

As a codified method of analysis, the phenomeno-pragmatic approach has allowed us to understand subjective, intimate phenomena from the accounts of individuals. The phenomenological description allowed us to take into account all the data incorporated in the material for a holistic understanding of the lived experience. The pragmatic transformation of the phenomenological approach comes from taking into account all the contents inscribed in the verbatim. Language was also analysed, not as a coded linguistic element per se, but as a meaningful oral expression in a particular context of enunciation which has also been described.

## Preliminary Results

The current research is ongoing but we can already give the following results: All the adult children interviewed said that they had felt or still feel guilt about the nursing home placement of their parent.

### (1) guilt for having acted badly towards the parent

Even if the life stories are different, even if the adult child in question was the only one to make the placement decision or if he or she followed the siblings' decision, even if the relationship with the parent had been very good or very bad, painful, the idea of feeling guilty about the nursing home placement is present in almost all the interviews. The central idea of this theme is that a child cannot make such a decision because it is against the basic principles of filiation. Reverse parenting is not socially and familiarly accepted. Even if the interviewees say that they had no better choice, the feeling of having done wrong is expressed through a strong guilt.

« I know it's not right what I did. I, her daughter, should not have done it but I had no other choice. I don't regret it but I tell myself that no child should have to go through this. I am the child, you understand? She raised me as best she could, it wasn't the best way but it's not my role to put her in a nursing home. She didn't put me in an orphanage and I put her in the elderly's prison. She didn't put me in an orphanage, but I put her in the old people's prison. I will die with this guilt. » (P.F.4)

### (2) guilt about not rising to the occasion as son/daughter

Adult children feel that they have not lived up to the parent's expectations, sometimes even before birth. The guilt comes from a feeling of not having been the child of the parent's dreams. The nursing home placement is seen as the last chance to redeem oneself and the fact of failing again reinforces the guilt felt throughout one's life.

"He wanted a boy, my mum used to tell me that he would talk to her belly and he would say: *You're a boy, be a boy!* (laughs) *You won't be a girl, I already have one.* And later he said to me, I was a child, eh? he said *it's your fault, you should have been a boy.* It all starts there, I think, I always felt guilty about him because I wasn't what he wanted. It's complicated, yeah, yeah...even now that he's gone" (P.F.2)

### (3) guilt about neglecting other relatives

The placement of a parent in a nursing home reflects feelings of guilt towards other family members such as the other parent or one's own family members (partner, children). The desire, duty or fear of feeling guilty about the placement of the parent pushes the child to be very present with the parent to the detriment of all other members.

« I was at the nursing home every day to see Dad, every day, every weekend. For 10 years, whenever I had a moment, I went to see him. My children were small at the time of Dad's accident, I didn't see them grow up. So yes, I have a lot of guilt, but not about him but about my children and my wife. I don't know how she could have stayed with me. I'm trying to rectify the situation but it's impossible. I feel very, very guilty (sighs, tears). » (P.H.7)

### (4) guilt about self-care

The total devotion to the parent with all the actions that result from it gives rise to feelings of guilt: low self-esteem, the feeling of having failed in life, of having been weak, of falling ill, all contribute to the psychological distress of the adult child. Nursing home placement often aggravates these feelings of guilt or represents the moment when the child realises and acknowledges his or her guilt.

« I was her thing all my life, I was weak, I only wanted one thing: that she loved me...I didn't see anything in my life, I came back from my honeymoon after 2 days because she called me...I didn't have children, my marriage didn't work, I lived with my mother all my life. (...) When she went into the nursing home, I brought her home several times. I was devastated. Fortunately, COVID came along. I realised that I could live without seeing her and I realised that I had missed everything in my life. Yes, I feel guilty about myself. Very very very guilty! » (P.F.1)

### (5) guilty of not feeling guilty

This result shows how the adult child's sense of guilt towards his or her elderly and dependent parent is a social and cultural reality that we cannot get rid of because it is embedded in all of us. Even when the child feels comfortable with the placement of the parent, they must feel guilty. The idea is that it is not in the norms not to feel guilty so we feel guilty because of the lack of guilt.

« I know it's not normal to be happy that my mother is in a nursing home. I have never felt guilty about it, never. But then I tell myself that I'm not normal, that I should have these feelings so I feel guilty for not feeling guilty. It's crazy but I really feel guilty! It hurts me... » (P.F.6)

## References