ADVERTISEMENT

Ad by Google
Why Ads? Stop seeing this ad
Ad Feedback

Identity

Why Are Boomer Parents Always Withholding Important Family News?

Whether it's a cancer diagnosis, the selling of a house, or the death of a grandparent, millennials and Gen Z kids often feel like the last to know.

By Rio Romero

May 19, 2021, 2:00pm | Share | Tweet | Snap

LIFE SPLIT FILMS

Taylor, the oldest child, is extremely protective of her mother, she said, and during their daily phone calls recently they talked about her mom's recent doctor's appointments. For a few weeks, Veronica got on a brisc face and kept Taylor in the dark about her health. Taylor's younger siblings, meanwhile, were more open about what they saw happen and frustrated. The two women share everything, Taylor said, so why would she be about something that impacted their whole family? "We have a long-lasting relationship. Why would you hold that information?" Taylor told VICE.

Taylor was set to launch a STEM program in September around the time her mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, and later suspected Veronica wanted to spare her the added stress of a cancer diagnosis as she embarked on the next stage of her career. Veronica admitted she was trying to "protect her daughter from anything that could possibly distract her or delay or prevent them from discovering the scared she was herself. "You don't want your kids to be worried about you, so there's a temptation not to tell us to give limited information," Veronica said.

Adult millennial children report feeling increasingly out of touch with their parents when it comes to important family news. Major health diagnoses go unshared, news of a loved one's passing is belated, money problems are withheld, and, in the case of Taylor and her mom, relationships intended to protect children from pain, but adult kids are often left angry or despondent, fearing they'd be a few ranking member on the send-to-listen list amid a family crisis.

ADVERTISEMENT

Generational differences have plagued parents' child relationships for decades. Studies have shown that unsolicited advice, lifestyle differences, and financial strain are major contributors of tension between parents and their adult children. When parents become grandparents, disagreements arise where the two generations fail to see eye-to-eye regarding child-rearing practices, and, in the case of multigenerational households, boomers/people born between 1946 and 1964 and millennials/people born between 1981 and 1996) have highlighted fraught differences in political views, finances, family, and communication.

This intergenerational mismatch stems from diverging approaches to emotional conversations, however, with parents seen as closed off and less likely to seek out mental health treatment. Boomers also gapped having less conversations about mental health with their children compared to their grandkids. By contrast, millennials have embraced therapy, and Gen Z is the generation most likely to discuss mental health. Within her practice, psychotherapist Kathy McCoy said VICE, most of her patients are millennial and Gen Z. "There are individual boomers who are very open about feelings," she said. "But I think the generational difference is that they don't talk about their feelings and much more likely to express feelings and to have to have a conversation with parents that's as feeling level and not as superficial."

ADVERTISEMENT

This breakdown is communication isn't unique to the boomer-millennial generations. Tawna Waglow-Dunford, a marriage and family therapist, told VICE, but it's been complicated by technology. While research shows both boomers and millennials prefer to interact face-to-face, the geographical distance between parent and child and the perception that texting and emailing are "safer" than talking on the phone have hampered difficult conversations with their long-distance kids.

Still, frequently calling and visiting parents might not be enough for parents who are determined to keep their kids in the dark. Jessica Greenhalgh, a 36-year-old communications consultant in Boston, suspects her parents don't tell her important news about their health because they believe it isn't her business. When her mother was diagnosed with leukemia, she didn't find out for months, and her father's cancer diagnosis and chemotherapy went unannounced. Two days after Greenhalgh's father tested positive for COVID-19 this winter, she got a call from her mom mentioning they didn't want to bother her with the news. She then ordered the help of a neighbor and a family friend to keep tabs on her parents since she didn't trust them to tell her if her dad might need to be hospitalized.

Greenhalgh's mother, Elizabeth Margolin Flores, 66, agrees she isn't the most forthcoming with her daughter, but maintains it's because her kids don't need to sweat her issues and want to maintain a strong bonds. To calm their ailing health or derailing bonds is to confuse their own limitations, McCoy said. "It's very hard for boomers, who are the generation that said 'Don't trust anyone over 30,' to realize that their children are now adults and as good as they used to be, it's very hard to let go of that image of control."

ADVERTISEMENT

However reasonable the desire to shield kids from bad news might be, Greenhalgh's parents didn't account for the consequences of their omission. While it may be difficult for parents to separate the memories of their child from the adult they've grown into, parents must make a cognizant effort to treat their kids as adults, Barra Dolnick said, instead of acting as if they're fragile or incapable of coping with bad news. Boomers who don't want their children to worry about their health and relationships's want their own parents to tell them about an illness or death of a grandparent. Or if parents purposely withhold that is a fear that their children will worry too much, Dolnick said, they should be honest and understand that their parents didn't effectively raise their children or let them down during childhood. Barra Dolnick said. Instead, boomer parents should trust they raised their children with healthy coping strategies to deal with emergencies.

Boomer parents may also be hesitant to share health concerns or financial woes because they want to maintain a strong bonds. To calm their ailing health or derailing bonds is to confuse their own limitations, McCoy said. "It's very hard for boomers, who are the generation that said 'Don't trust anyone over 30,' to realize that their children are now adults and as good as they used to be, it's very hard to let go of that image of control."

ADVERTISEMENT

Adult children have an expectation that as they enter adulthood, their parents will consider them emotional equals, especially regarding family matters. Yet, when parents withhold news, it can feel infantilizing and sow misunderstanding. Mutual respect and trust are crucial to a healthy relationship, and when parents don't treat their children as adults, it can feel like a betrayal. Greenhalgh's mother Elizabeth Margolin Flores, 66, said she didn't tell her daughter about her cancer diagnosis and chemotherapy because they were in the middle of a pandemic. Her husband's cancer diagnosis and chemotherapy went unannounced. Two days after Greenhalgh's father tested positive for COVID-19 this winter, she got a call from her mom mentioning they didn't want to bother her with the news. She then ordered the help of a neighbor and a family friend to keep tabs on her parents since she didn't trust them to tell her if her dad might need to be hospitalized.

Greenhalgh's mother, Elizabeth Margolin Flores, 66, agrees she isn't the most forthcoming with her daughter, but maintains it's because her kids don't need to sweat her issues and want to maintain a strong bonds. To calm their ailing health or derailing bonds is to confuse their own limitations, McCoy said. "Trending the narrative and lives share it. It's almost like a free draft. I need a bit of time to refine the message before sharing."

ADVERTISEMENT

Greenhalgh said she has noticed herself mirroring her parents' communication style. Not only does she stop from discussing her own problems with friends, but she sometimes keeps her parents in the dark, too. Her mom's cancer diagnosis and recovery was finalized that she had her parents 50th anniversary party.

Greenhalgh doesn't feel her a valued member of the family when her parents aren't forthcoming with life updates. "It really does convey a feeling that I don't have a relationship with my parents that I feel I should have," she said. "If they're going through chemo bags 50 years and need to discuss them with people they care about, I may be one of those people."

Boomer parents told VICE in their intention to keep their kids in the dark, they just don't want to disrupt their children's burgeoning adult lives. Christopher Adams, 56, the Fort Lauderdale based founder of aquarium care website Modular Fish, said he doesn't plan on telling his kids about his cancer diagnosis. Adams said he wants his children to focus on their careers his him as he recovers. He and his wife also didn't inform their children when their grandfather was hospitalized with Covid-19 last year. Michael, a retired police officer in New Jersey, waited to share the news of his cancer diagnosis until he felt he had answers prepared for every potential question his kids might have. Michael said he underwent chemotherapy and radiation without telling "They don't need to have another burden on their heads wondering how mom or dad is doing," the 57-year-old told VICE.

ADVERTISEMENT

Adult children have an expectation that as they enter adulthood, their parents will consider them emotional equals, especially regarding family matters. Yet, when parents withhold news, it can feel infantilizing and sow misunderstanding. Mutual respect and trust are crucial to a healthy relationship, and when parents don't treat their children as adults, it can feel like a betrayal. Greenhalgh's mother Elizabeth Margolin Flores, 66, said she didn't tell her daughter about her cancer diagnosis and chemotherapy because they were in the middle of a pandemic. Her husband's cancer diagnosis and chemotherapy went unannounced. Two days after Greenhalgh's father tested positive for COVID-19 this winter, she got a call from her mom mentioning they didn't want to bother her with the news. She then ordered the help of a neighbor and a family friend to keep tabs on her parents since she didn't trust them to tell her if her dad might need to be hospitalized.

Throughout her entire adult life, Rome found writer Felicity Brennan's boomer father has failed to tell her what she considered important information. Minor accidents, giving away her motorcycle without her permission. When, last year, he sold a family home she expected to inherit, she found out months later when he mentioned it casually on the phone.

Aside from an elderly great uncle, Brennan's father is the only family she has. If he didn't make the effort to bring to touch, Brennan said, she would be totally in the dark, even if her aunt wrote to die. Brennan, 40, believes her father's behavior stems from a desire to protect her from disappointment, but a great world confiding in. "It doesn't cross his mind that sharing information means that the message you're sending me is I am part of a family and I'm willing and to talk about things together," Brennan told VICE. "It is the metaphorical. So it the house, but what really hurts is you feel excluded from the family, and the family is just him and I."

Even if there have been past instances of withholding, communication between parents and their adult children can be fraught, and parents of adult children should make clear to their parents they want to support them through any difficulties, McCoy said, you could say something like, "I want to support you now and always. What do you feel comfortable sharing with me, and how can I help you?"

Barra Dolnick suggested establishing a basis of clear and open communication where parent and child catch up, first of any discussion. Regardless of history or distance, maintain weekly phone calls so you don't feel more ingrained in each other's lives. It also important to address fears of being a burden, Greenhalgh said, and to let your parents know that your opinions are uncomfortable for the parent to share with their kids. If the parent is concerned with being judged, they need to convey this to their child, rather than avoiding the news entirely, Barra Dolnick said.

Following a stillbirth caused diagnosis, the Dimmelers-daughter Taylor and mother Veronica- both strengthened their communication skills and established boundaries. While Veronica understands that her adult children want to protect her from stress and her health, she still entitled to process the information. Taylor is there to be a sympathetic ear when her mom needs to vent.

"Even though I'm concerned," Taylor said, "I'm still not the one she's battling this."

Follow Rio Romero on Twitter.

TAGS: FAMILY, FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS, PARENTS

ORIGINAL REPORTING ON EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS IN YOUR INBOX.

Sign Up

By signing up to the VICE newsletter you agree to receive electronic communications from VICE that may sometimes include personalized or targeted content.

YOU MAY LIKE

[Immagini] A 18 anni Tutti Collegio che in questa zona
SPONSORED | SPONSORED | SPONSORED

Intestini: un semplice trucco per eccellenti complessioni
SPONSORED | SPONSORED | SPONSORED

Top 10 Mac Antivirus - Da Mac Users Really Need Protection
SPONSORED | SPONSORED | SPONSORED

Promo Fibra TIM a 25,90€/mese con Attivazione Inclusa fino al 16/05!
SPONSORED | SPONSORED | SPONSORED

[Fotografie] A 23 anni ecco come si presenta Chiara gioia
SPONSORED | SPONSORED | SPONSORED

Scopri CREAM NOW 1KGR. Cliccate ora e 4,90 €
SPONSORED | SPONSORED | SPONSORED

[Galleria] La Figlia di Heidi Klum sfoggia il look di una vecchia amica
SPONSORED | SPONSORED | SPONSORED

10 indizi che un ragazzino/a ti sta mandando i segnali di fuoco
SPONSORED | SPONSORED | SPONSORED

MORE FROM VICE

Society
A Year From the 2020 Olympics, Winter Sports in India's Wild Ghost in Progress
Nearly a year after the Olympics, Indian winter sport enthusiasts make a crass bid for affiliation.
BY ANI | NEW DELHI
MAY 19, 2021

Economy
Dreaming of Post-COVID Trips? Away to Pierce a Huge Luggage Sale
Travel is still a pipe dream for most, but there's hopeful goods. Travel is heading to market 20% of sales will be placing up and 20%
BY ANDREW SMITH, NEW YORK TIMES
MAY 19, 2021

Health
What Is Do If a Sibling's Jealousy Is Hurting Your Family Apart?
Sibling jealousy can be a problem for parents, raise story, or relationship complication and seek these conversations but worry. Here's how to turn things around.
BY ALEX BERG
MAY 19, 2021

Life
Daily Horoscope: July 20, 2021
Astrologer Angela Porter
BY ANGELA PORTER
JUL 20, 2021

Life
Daily Horoscope: March 29, 2021
The Stars in Flight
BY ANGELA PORTER
MAR 29, 2021