

Caring for an Aging Parent - Some Advice from People Who Have Been There

As our parents age we find ourselves doing a little more for them – helping with routine household maintenance, maybe taking them to social functions when they're uncomfortable driving at night. As time goes by we will likely be doing more and more. What used to be occasional assistance may become weekly or even daily. And at some point, such as after an illness or injury, caring for our parents may be a regular part of our day and we may be involved in preparing meals, dressing, making sure medications are taken – virtually every aspect of our parent's lives.

Whether you're just starting to see that your parents will need more help from you, or if you've been caring for them for some time, here are some tips to make that journey easier.

You're likely to fight a continuous battle against several sources of stress:

Not having enough time to care for your parents, at the same time you're trying to care for your family and keep up with your responsibilities at work.

Not knowing how much to do. How do you help where it's needed, but not promote an unnecessary sense of dependence? Likewise, how do you make sure your parents are healthy and safe without being intrusive or bossy?

Not knowing what to do. There will be many times when you simply don't know what you should be doing. Sometimes it's because you don't have the information you need, other times the problem is that you have too much information.

Feeling that you're doing too much, or too little. Guilt is always ready to tag along with you and nag you that you're short-changing your responsibilities at home, or that you're not doing enough for your parents. Resentment is the flip side of guilt, and no matter how saintly you are, you'll feel it.

Fatigue. The physical demands of caregiving, coupled with the emotional strain, will leave you just plain tired, day after day.

Take heart! There are lots of things you can do to make this journey much easier. Here are some tips gathered from those who've been there:

Get your family involved. Call a meeting with your brothers, sisters or other relatives. Figure out who's how to share responsibilities and, if necessary, the bills. This will not only help in sharing the workload, but will ensure that everyone is dealing with the same information, making future decision-making easier.

Get the medical information you'll need, including everything you can learn about your parent's medical condition, medications and prognosis. This may mean getting to know your parent's physician

and staying in touch with him or her. If your parent has an illness, learn as much as you can about it from the library or web sites.

Understand their financial situation. Start a file folder with sections on health insurance, monthly bills, income, bank accounts and all other financial information. You may not need to take over your parent's financial affairs right now, but understanding their financial situation will allow you and them to plan their health care and future living arrangements. There are good checklists available to help organize this type of information, including the [ElderCare Planning Kit](#) in this series of articles. Assembling this information will be a big time-saver.

Keep notes. Start a notebook to keep a running record of your conversations with doctors, insurance companies, lawyers and everyone else. Note with whom you talked, the date, and the substance of the conversation.

Talk to your parents about their wishes. Ultimately, your responsibility is to help your parents with whatever their wishes are. Keep the conversation open with them about how they feel, what they want, what they fear. This will help keep everyone's expectations on the same page and enable all of you to plan for the future.

Take care of yourself. Regularly take stock of your physical and emotion well being. You may need to schedule a break from caregiving. Look into a support group. Just finding others who are struggling with the same issues can be an immense help. They can offer practical advice as well as emotional support.

Use the help that's available. There are lots of organizations to help people just like you. They might be in your church, or down the street or across town. Contact Seniors, Inc., or the United Way to start learning about all the kinds of help – from in-home care to transportation to assisted living.

Consider getting a care manager to help. Called case managers or care managers, these are professionals trained in geriatric care. They can provide you with an assessment to determine what kind of help is best, and can go the next step to arrange for that help to be delivered – everything from meal preparation to taking care of the household maintenance to making appointments at the beauty salon. They will also continue to monitor your parent and the quality of care being provided. Care managers usually charge by the hour. They can be your sounding board, your impartial advisor, your advocate and your personal representative at your relative's side. If your parent lives in a distant city, they're indispensable.