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Caring for Aging Parents - Part 1



No one knows your parents as well as you do and no one cares for them as much. But caring for an aging family member can be frustrating, emotional, tiring, and scary, both for you and for the person you're caring for. Find out how you can best prepare yourself, your family, and your parent for some of the changes that may be in the future.

Prepare everyone emotionally well in advance

Caring for an aging family member can be enormously stressful, both for you and for the person you're caring for. Most people caring for aging parents are women who are also managing careers and raising a family. Your own children may be just entering or just leaving high school. It can be a time of enormous change and uncertainty for everyone.

Be sure you have the support and understanding of the people around you. Talk about it with your spouse or partner so they can be aware of what kinds of demands may be placed on you and the family in the coming months and years. Talk to your siblings as well. Be sure you are all aware of the choices you may have to make and ensure everyone is clear on how those decisions will be made and who will be taking on certain responsibilities. Even siblings who are far away may have strong feelings about certain things. Try to make sure everyone understands their expectations of themselves and their expectations of others. For example:

- Do your parents want or expect a lot of involvement from their children?
- Do you want your sibling to be involved in the decision making from the beginning or to leave most things to you?
- Does a sibling expect to be kept informed on a regular basis?
- Do you expect financial support from the parent or siblings?
- Do you expect siblings to take over from time to time to give you a break, and do you expect your parent or parents to understand that?

Remember, you want to preserve their dignity as much as possible. The best way to accomplish this is to start talking with everyone involved early, before big decisions need to be made. Throughout this process you'll need to understand your parents' feelings and consider how they want to be cared for. There are many things you'll need to find out about. Some are obvious and some you may not have thought of before. **Here are some of the preferences you will want to know about:**

- How do they feel about having a housekeeper coming into the home on a regular basis?
- Will they ask you for help, or do they feel uncomfortable asking?
- Do they need help with groceries? Do they need help cooking meals? Would they consider a meal plan such as Meals on Wheels?
- Would they want you to visit daily? Or weekly? What about calling daily?
- How do they feel about you checking that bills are being paid?
- If at some point they are no longer able to live at home, what kind of living arrangements would they prefer? Living with you? In a seniors' residence? In a nursing home? This will also give you an indication of how much independence they want to preserve and for how long.

Start discussing long-term care plans and preferences with parents and siblings as early as possible, preferably when the parent is still in good health and enjoying an

independent lifestyle. There may be some reluctance on all sides to talk about it, so starting off with only short, casual conversations and asking about certain preferences that are easy to discuss may be a good way to start. Broach the subject gently; it's a conversation, not an interrogation. **Keeping the lines of communication open and building trust is important.** The more you talk with them, the more they will trust that you are looking out for them and doing your best.

How do you know when to step in?

Your involvement in your parents' care may start very suddenly with an illness or an accident. Chances are, it will be clear at that time what you need to do. But if things progress more gradually, it can be difficult to know when you should step in and how much you should do. This can be made even more difficult if your parent or parents insist they can "handle it." **How do you know when to step in?**

When you're trying to decide how involved you should be, take your cues from your parents but try to be aware of details and patterns they may be missing. If you notice dangerous, possibly life-threatening, behaviours, it may be time to insist a little more strongly. **Some of the more important things to look out for include:**

- difficulty walking or climbing stairs
- poor personal hygiene, difficulty shaving or showering, or soiled clothing
- changes in eating habits
- forgetfulness or confusion about familiar things
- forgetting medications or taking them too frequently
- persistent irritability or sudden mood changes
- signs of depression
- unpaid bills

If you're starting to be concerned but aren't certain, **talk to your parents' doctor or pharmacist.** Ask about their medical conditions and get to know what signs indicate they are worsening. Ask about the medications they're taking and how you can tell if they've missed some or are taking them too much. It's possible some of the behaviors you're noticing are a reaction to a medication and a simple adjustment may be necessary. Also, because the doctor and pharmacist have much more experience helping seniors, their insights could be valuable.

How far do you go? How involved do you get? How much do you insist? The answers to these questions are very personal and can be very difficult. It's important to remember that you're dealing with an adult, however physically and emotionally frail and dependent they may seem. They have made many important decisions in the past and they are used to independence and autonomy. It may be difficult for your parents to accept your involvement in areas of their life which, in the past, were totally private. Be patient and understanding.

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