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Caring for Aging Parents - Part 2



A time will come when you'll need to be involved directly in your parents' care. Be prepared for it. But also be prepared to take care of yourself so you can continue to fulfill your obligations as parent, spouse, and employee.

Early steps in caring for your parent

So far, things have been going pretty smoothly with your parent and you haven't had too many concerns. But you know the time is coming when you'll need to be involved in a more direct way. Just as it's important to talk with siblings and your own family members about the changes ahead, there are other people you may want to talk to as well. **You may find the support of these people very helpful for ongoing care and in times of crisis.**

- Let **your employer** know about the possible changes in your personal circumstances. Their understanding will help relieve the stress if you have to take time off work for doctor's appointments or to deal with other matters.
- Make an appointment with **your parents' doctor** and let them know about your concerns. Find out what you need to do should you need information from them about your parents' health condition. Listen to their advice on what symptoms to look for that may indicate worsening of their health conditions.
- Visit **your parents' pharmacist** and make sure they know who you are in case you have any questions about the medications your parents may be taking and possible side effects to watch out for.
- Know who **your parents' friends and neighbours** are, and make sure they know you.

You've spoken with everyone you can think of to ensure everyone involved with the care of your parent is well informed. That's an excellent beginning. Now you need to get down to the practical business of caring for another person. Take the time to think, plan, and gather information. It's time well spent and will save you aggravation and worry in the future. Here are some things to get you started:

- **Start gathering information** so you have it all easily accessible when you need it. This includes:
 - a list of all medical conditions and medications
 - their provincial health card number(s)
 - names, phone numbers, and addresses of doctors, specialists, dentist, and pharmacy
 - names and phone numbers of their friends, neighbours, and people you should call in case of an emergency
 - if they're renting accommodation or living in a condo, the names and phone numbers for the landlord, condominium corporation, and maintenance staff
 - account numbers and contact numbers for all credit cards, bank accounts, financial advisors, insurance policies, and investments
 - name and phone number of their lawyer
 - copy of their will, power of attorney for property, power of attorney for personal care, living will
- Make sure you and others have a key to the house.
- Keep good notes of any appointments, symptoms you observe, phone calls, changes in health conditions, or moodiness.

- Follow up with healthcare professionals.
- Find out about community resources.
- Be honest about your own needs.

Two of the most important documents to have prepared well in advance are the powers of attorney for financial and healthcare decisions. Without these two documents, you may find yourself without the authority to make important decisions at a critical time. You and your parent should carefully consider who will be named on these documents. Be sure you, your parent, and your siblings understand what authority and responsibility these documents cover.

Taking care of yourself

As you embark on the journey of caring for your parents, your life may become very stressful. In order to ensure you are able to continue to fulfill your obligations as parent, spouse, and employee, you will need to take care of yourself. **Maintaining your health and good humour will require effort, but it's an important part of being able to care for others effectively.** You'll need a firm belief that you deserve to spend some time on yourself, and you'll have to defend that time against the many other demands you'll feel. Here are a number of small things you can do to start you off on the right foot:

- **Get enough sleep.** You may not have the time to do everything you'd like, but getting enough sleep helps you stay calm to do the important things with good humour.
- **Eat right.** That means a lot more fruit, vegetables, and water, and less salt, fat, and refined sugars. Be sure you get the calories you need in their most nutritious form and you can feel good about treating yourself to an indulgence once in a while.
- **Keep the lines of communication open with your spouse or partner.** As busy as you may be, don't forget they are there for moral support and to help out when you need it.
- **Take some time off.** Spend some time thinking about what your needs are and be up front with them. Don't feel guilty about devoting some time to hobbies and your own friends. Be firm, not resentful.
- **Most importantly, take a deep breath and appreciate the small pleasures.**

Caring for a parent can be very stressful, but there's much you can do to help you prepare yourself for the road ahead. A big part of that preparation is talking to your parent, siblings, your spouse or partner, and your friends, but it's also a big part of getting the moral support you need.

Although the phrase "parenting your parents" is a bit of a misnomer - caring for someone isn't necessarily parenting them - many of the same emotional tools are required. Patience, understanding, firmness, empathy, and the willingness to look out for someone else are all skills you'll put to good use. Use them on yourself as well - give yourself a break.

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