

Effectively Caring for Aging Parents



As more Americans live longer, millions of middle-aged adults find themselves caring for their aging parents. It's not an easy task, especially for those with children still living at home.

"Caregiving can be so overwhelming, it's almost impossible," says Donna Cohen, Ph.D., a professor in the department of aging and mental health at the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida. "But it can be done if you develop specific skills and tailor them according to your parents' needs and your family's circumstances."

The following is a framework designed to help you provide care more effectively.

Don't Parent Your Parents

As your parents age and become frail or ill, resist the urge to regard them as children. Instead, think of caregiving as a family business and yourself as an executive with problems to solve.

"Treat your parents as having a legitimate role. This empowers a partnership," Dr. Cohen says. "Your role will be to take control, but it's not with the same authority you use with your children."

For example: Your mother can't see well anymore but insists on driving. Instead of taking away her car keys, sit down with her and begin a dialogue. Say, "Mom, I'm worried about you. Aren't you worried about your driving?"

Kinds of Care

The kind of care your parents need depends on their level of dependence. This is something you can determine in conjunction with your parents and their health care provider: Do they need to be in a nursing facility? An assisted living arrangement? Can they continue to live on their own, but with some outside help?

A variety of government programs are available for the elderly. You can find more information on them by looking in your local phone book under Aging Services.

Don't Do It Alone

Because every family is different, there's no one right way of caring for aging parents. "But there are wrong ways, and the worst one is to do it alone," Dr. Cohen says. The demands of caregiving can become so immense that they can affect your health, leading to illness and depression.

"Half of all caregivers get depressed in the course of caregiving," Dr. Cohen says. "In turn, depression takes a toll on their physical health, affecting their job performance and can even lead to the abuse of the parents they're caring for."

To manage caregiving effectively, seek help and advice from professionals and your siblings. For example: Consult a financial planner or attorney regarding your parents' estate, living wills and other legal matters. Work with physicians to understand your parents' health problems and the treatments they're getting. Talk to a pharmacist to learn the potential side effects of their medications and to make sure those medications are compatible.

Meet with your siblings over breakfast, not at the end of the day when everyone's tired. Describe the problem you're facing and share your feelings about it with them. Let them do the same.

"Besides determining what's workable for your parents, your goal should be to find the best way for everyone to work together," Dr. Cohen says.

Stay Optimistic

Unlike caring for children, caring for aging parents, particularly ill ones, involves the reality that their deaths are approaching.

Nonetheless, "let yourself be guided by a tempered optimism," Dr. Cohen says. "Don't let your hope for the future die too fast."

Within limits, there are things you can do now to maximize comfort and improve your parents' quality of life. "You can convey support and show affection by giving your mother a new chenille throw because you know she'll enjoy its softness and warmth," she says. "Even holding someone's hand is a powerful way to ease pain and loneliness."

All told, "caring is more than loving," she says. "It's a series of discreet skills that involve listening to your parents, making decisions about their needs and taking action, if necessary. And it has mutual benefits. Through caring, we can learn more about ourselves."