

Planning the Care of Your Aging Parents

If your parents are in their golden years, keep in mind that even gold can lose some of its glow with the inevitable effects of old age -- and sooner or later, older loved ones will need assistance.

"It's never too early to start planning for their future care," says Virginia Morris, author of "How to Care for Aging Parents."

"Many children of aging parents wait until there's a crisis, and then they're left scrambling for mediocre options. Everyone -- especially those who live far away from their parents and work full time -- can benefit from being prepared and planning far ahead."



Advance planning means:

- Making sure legal documents have been drawn up, including an up-to-date will, a durable power of attorney, a living will and a health-care proxy.
- Researching the housing options and services available in your parents' community.
- Discussing with your loved ones how you can help with their future housing, financial and medical-care needs.
- Asking them about growing old -- "what are their concerns, their worries, what's important to them, how can you help them?" says Ms. Morris.

"Don't parent your parent," she urges. "The point isn't to control your parents' life, but to help them maintain control. Your role is to give them as much autonomy and independence as possible."

When it's time to act

One day, all the signs may point to the need for you to actively step in to assist your parents. Telltale signs include:

- Your loved ones start losing weight.
- They stop washing their hair or clothing.
- They drink more alcohol.
- They leave piles of unpaid bills on their desk.
- They let food grow moldy in the refrigerator.
- They start walking unsteadily.

"Trust your instincts," Ms. Morris says. "Anything that strikes you as 'Hmmm, is this OK?' probably isn't OK."

Important first steps

Immediately open a line of communication with your parents' doctors so you can discuss your concerns. And if you live far away, obtain a copy of your parents' local phone book so you can contact care providers and other resources.

Defining your limits

Many adult children find their first steps into caregiving responsibilities are like walking into quicksand. If you don't manage your time well or haven't planned in advance, you can become mired in never-ending obligations, such as daily chores and care, handling legal or financial issues or lining up health-care providers.

"You need to set limits," says Ms. Morris. "Establishing limits doesn't mean you don't love your parents or that you can't take good care of them. But you're not going to be any good to them if you're depressed, angry or sick -- you have to take care of yourself."

To do this, Ms. Morris suggests you:

- Decide what you can reasonably do to help, then stick with that plan. If you decide you'll visit your mother twice per week, help her manage her finances and investigate local resources, then that's what you should do. Get help for other needs as they arise.

- Accept help early on -- from relatives, friends, neighbors, churches and synagogues, senior centers or home-care agencies. "Set up a whole support network -- don't be the only person doing this," says Ms. Morris.
- Take care of yourself. Get exercise, get enough sleep, pay attention to your diet and go to support-group meetings for caregivers.

"People often push themselves until they become burnt out and angry at their siblings, and their work starts to suffer. I have seen several times where caregivers ended up in the hospital because they were so wiped out," says Ms. Morris. "This can be a consuming job -- it's crucial to take care of yourself."

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