



Work Force Of Interest

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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.

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."

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"Caregiving often calls us to lean into love we didn't know possible"

-Tai Walker

A Caregiver Action Plan

Okay, so you've made a commitment to be a caregiver for someone you love, but now what's the next step. This responsibility comes with many emotional and personal demands that can take a toll on your mental and physical health if not attended to appropriately. One of the best ways to address this is to make sure you are well prepared before you begin and put a plan into action. Knowing what's expected of you and your family will help you provide the best level of care to your care recipient.

Consider adding these suggestions to a caregiver plan tailored to meet the needs of your family:

- Get the help you need when you need it
- Involve your family in the caregiving
- Get everyone's input before making decisions
- Avoid taking on all of the responsibility
- Expect the unexpected in every area of your life
- Accept and work through feelings of doubt, anxiety, depression, grief, and anger
- Be willing to confide in others
- Find a support group
- Allow yourself to be emotional when you need to be
- Understand that you're going to make mistakes
- Avoid dwelling on your mistakes
- Set up some way to manage your own physical and emotional needs
- Don't let your hobbies and recreational interests fall by the wayside
- Look at your responsibilities from one day to the next and find the joy in what you do
- Be sure to plan from start to finish for as many issues as you can prepare for
- Keep the lines of communication open with the care recipient

An action plan is a starting point - a place to begin making decisions and gathering information that will help you provide the most effective care that you can offer. It's not easy being a caregiver, but with the right planning and preparedness, you can eliminate a lot of the unnecessary stress that interferes with the quality of care you are able to provide.

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