

## AGING PARENTS: HELPING WHEN HEALTH FAILS

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*Mother is becoming more forgetful and confused. She doesn't remember to take her medication and forgets to turn off the stove. What can I do?*

*Should Dad be forbidden to drive? His vision is poor; he's had one minor accident. Still, he seems to drive the four blocks to the store okay.*

*Situations like these are difficult for families.*

The decline of a parent's health or intellectual capacities often requires adult sons and daughters to become involved in decisions about a parent's life. Many families are ill equipped to deal with these new situations in their life. This publication provides general guidelines to consider if you face the dilemma of what to do about aged relatives.

**Before a Crisis.** One of the best approaches is to talk with parents before a crisis develops. Discuss the future, explore options, and have more than one plan.

Look for natural opportunities to talk about the future. For example, when an older family friend suffers a health crisis, enters a nursing home, or moves to the home of an adult son or daughter may be a good time to discuss similar occurrences in your family. Talking with parents about "what ifs" may not be easy if you have not been accustomed to having frank discussions of emotion-laden issues.

**Coping with Feelings.** It often is difficult to accept the reality that the parent you depended upon is now increasingly dependent upon you. Adjusting our perceptions of our parents is not easy. It may be helpful to express feelings to someone who will listen and understand--a friend, family member, minister, or health care professional.

**Guidelines for Reducing Strain.** Adult children often find that an aged parent needs assistance at a time when their own lives and responsibilities are most complicated. If your parent is 85+ you are likely to be in your 60s adjusting to retirement and reduced income, widowhood or declining health. You may find it difficult or impossible to provide the assistance needed by your parent.

•*Communicate openly* - Open, honest communication helps build and maintain effective relationships. Oftentimes, family members are not honest or direct enough with each other. Adult children often will say what they think their parents want to hear or what they think won't upset their parents.

Try using "I" messages to promote communication. With "I" messages, the individual speaks from personal feelings and identifies both the specific behavior and/or situation of concern and its effect on him or her. For example, "Mom, because of your recent seizures, I'm concerned about your safety living in the house alone; I'm afraid you'll have another seizure and fall again." This communicates feelings instead of a "you" message ("You must move, Mom; it isn't safe for you to live by yourself anymore").

•*Involve your parent in decision making* - Involving the older person in the planning and decision making is important. Change can cause anxiety, but not being involved in decisions about a change creates even more anxiety.

Shared decisions usually produce the best results. Aged parents have a legal and moral right to participate in plans affecting their lives and to make their own decisions whenever possible. However, you may not always agree with their choices. Only if your parents experience reduced mental capacity and/or there is evidence they are endangering the lives of others, would you question their ability to make decisions.

If you must set limits, involve your parent in the decision about how to implement these limits. Your parent's physician may be helpful in the decision making process. A parent who is excluded from decision making is most likely to become angry, demanding, helpless, or withdrawn. Plans are also more likely to backfire. Make plans with your parent as early as possible if there is evidence of progressive mental decline.

•*Explore options* - Explore various options such as your parent's income sources, current and potential

expenses, possible financial support (including Medicare and Medicaid), public assistance agencies, Internal Revenue Service, home health agencies, health department, Meals on Wheels, etc., before making decisions. It is best not to have a preconceived notion about the "best solution."

Avoid making irrevocable decisions. Keep options open. Approach your judgment from the perspective of "this seems like the best option for now. Let's see how it works for four weeks. Then we'll reassess it."

Explore family resources. Talk with various family members about what each can contribute. Don't criticize other family members' contributions; remember that your nonjudgmental attitude may help build family solidarity.

•*Hold a family conference* - Involve the older adult, siblings, spouses, and other relatives who are concerned or will be affected by decisions under consideration. Don't exclude concerned family members because of personality, limited resources, or distance. It is as important to include a brother or sister who is argumentative or who "never visits or seems to care" in the family conference as it is the brother or sister who provides financial and/or emotional support. This helps to avoid later undermining of the decision by those not included. Be honest, share feelings, and focus on the **current** problem, not past family problems or rivalries.

**Avoid Too Much Loving Protection.** The desire to overprotect is natural; however, it is usually the last thing an older person wants or needs. The goal is to strive for a balance in caring. Don't assume responsibility for functions that your parent can still perform (even with difficulty). You're likely to make him or her angry, depressed, or more dependent.

Don't make assumptions about where your parent needs to live; don't force your values on your parent. What one thinks is "best" or "bad" for a parent is not always true. It is important to focus on a parent's strengths and remaining abilities. Don't focus on just limitations. If you are worried about a parent's safety, express your concerns by using "I" statements.

It's important not to let old promises, "shoulds," or guilt guide your decisions. They reduce objectivity and reduce your ability to make satisfactory choices. You

need to consider what is best for you and your family as well as your parent.

**Providing Care.** Depending upon the specific need, caregiving can be a lot of different activities from providing round-the-clock supervision to providing for health care, to shopping. You are responsible to some degree for another person's well-being. Providing care to a frail older parent can be stressful and rigorously demanding, regardless of family commitment. Many changes occur in the lives of both the caregiver and the older parent.

Role changes can cause fear, conflict, and confusion for everyone. Frail older persons often resent the burden they create, feel anger and frustration in relinquishing roles, or become demanding in an attempt to regain the control they feel slipping away.

•*Meet your own needs* - Don't ignore your own needs; it's detrimental to yourself and to the person who needs your care. It will lead to "burnout"--a depletion of your physical, emotional, and spiritual resources.

Set limits on what you can do and communicate this to others. It's unrealistic and unfair to expect other people "to know" when you need help. Avoid the "I can do it alone" attitude.

•*Plan ahead* - Realize that the decision to be a caregiver is not a permanent one. There may come a time when you are no longer able to provide care. Consider options, including nursing home or adult foster care, in advance of need.

**No Easy Answers.** Each situation must be treated individually. It's important to consider the feelings, desires, and needs of everyone. Look at what is best for all, and don't let guilt guide decision making.

Become involved in learning about the aging process and what to expect in late life transitions. This can be helpful in coping with aging parents and also in coping with your own aging-related changes.

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