Aging Parents and Adult Children

Having an adult relationship with your parents can be both rewarding and challenging. The challenges can become especially difficult as they continue to age. Transitioning to a caregiving role is a major shift as the parent/child roles begin to reverse. You must determine how to care for yourself and focus on your parent as well, and the stress of this task can strain your relationship and affect your physical and emotional well-being.

The Aging Process
In many ways, aging is a grieving process. Older adults slowly lose their independence, as their mind and body fail to function properly. Your aging loved one may need to transition from their home to yours or to a medical facility. Try to be empathetic with them and consider how you would feel if you lost control of your body. How would you react if decisions were made about your life and future without your consent? When you put yourself in your aging loved one’s shoes you might better understand why they are experiencing grief-like symptoms.

Transition Tips for Aging Parents and Adult Children
The following guidelines provide information to help you practice good self-care and caregiving skills.

Self-care Tips

- **Care for yourself first** – Caregiver stress can cause physical, emotional and mental problems. When we don’t prioritize ourselves we limit our caregiving efforts. It’s important to get proper rest, good nutrition and regular exercise to maintain our optimal health. When we feel better we’re able to enjoy our loved ones more. Ask for help and delegate tasks to other family members if you need it.

- **No comparisons** – Every adult child is different. You need to be comfortable saying “no” when you’re unable to physically or emotionally handle a responsibility. Just because another friend caring for their parent can accomplish the task doesn’t mean it’s necessarily right for you. Know your limitations. Also, it’s wise to avoid comparing your relationship with your parents to other families. Every family has its own unique challenges.

- **Understand your anxiety** – Relationships with our parents can sometimes be difficult. When we’re stressed and anxious about other areas of life it’s easy to direct those emotions toward those we love most. The more easily you can identify when you are stressed or anxious, the better equipped you’ll be to know when to handle situations with your parents. Choose a time you’re calm and able to do your best thinking.

- **Accept a lack of recognition** – It can be challenging, but it’s important to grasp that you may not receive praise and thanks for taking on this responsibility. Some parents struggle deeply with change and the fear of aging, so they’re unable to express their appreciation. It’s important to focus on why the job is important, rather than the lack of recognition.

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Caregiving Tips

- **Practice empathy** – If your parent is experiencing chronic pain, it’s difficult to be in a happy mood all the time. They may put on a front in front of others but feel comfortable to express themselves with family. Try to understand what pains your parent is feeling as well as the physical and cognitive losses. This can help you empathize with their moods, comments and expressions.
  - **Listen** – Listening is the greatest honor you could give as it honors your parent. Be patient with them, as it might take longer to articulate their thoughts, especially their fears and stories.
  - **Fears** – The aging process can be scary. It’s possible your parent is experiencing rational or irrational fears. Listening to them can calm their nerves. Try to explain facts in a simple, non-threatening way.
- **Repetition** – Be kind toward your parent when they repeat themselves. Perhaps, you’re hearing the same childhood story for the thousandth time. Also, if they’re struggling with technology use, remember that some tasks are extremely difficult with memory loss or degenerating eyesight. Be patient, as you would be with a child struggling to read or tie their shoes.

- **Watch for personality changes** – Cognitive difficulties can alter your parent’s personality. In addition, medication can affect personality. It’s important to contact their physician if there are any sudden changes. You may be accused of trying to hurt them, or they might be suspicious of you. They could have sudden outbursts, yell and become visibly distressed. Try not to take these personally, as this is not the true heart of your parent.
- **Give back power** – It can be easier to do certain tasks for your parent simply because you can do them faster. Things might be calmer if you give some control over to your parent, even in small areas. Also, ask for their input about decisions that affect their life. Giving back power, even if it’s minimal, can greatly improve your relationship.

The process of giving up control over your life isn’t easy for anyone. However, when we’re able to walk our parents through decision-making with small changes, they are more likely to trust us with the big ones. Ultimately, doing the right thing for your parent’s well-being is what matters most, to both of you.

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Caring for an Aging Loved One

With hospital stays becoming shorter and medical costs rising, more families have to make difficult decisions about their loved ones. The aging population is growing; and while the details may be different, caring for an aging loved one is becoming commonplace in homes around the country. More than 65 million Americans are currently caring for a loved one. Of those caregivers, nearly two-thirds work outside the home in addition to tending to their family member.

**Caregiver Responsibilities**

Caregivers help in many areas, including grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, paying bills and administering medication. Also, they often assist with helping a loved one bathe, eat, dress and use the restroom, but there is much more involved than the physical care of an aging loved one. At times, the emotional needs may be even greater. Loss of their home, health and/or brain function can be physically, emotionally and mentally draining to both the patient and caregiver. There also might be
'Caring for...' continued from Page 2

communication needs, where you are functioning as the spokesperson for your loved one. It’s essential to be mindful of yourself and your needs as a caregiver; as caregiving places unique demands on an individual and on the family unit.

Involving Your Aging Loved Ones
Respecting your loved one and keeping them involved in the caregiving process is both honoring and dignifying for them. Long-term planning regarding medical, financial and housing situations is critical; and your aging loved one should be included in all those decisions.

Health and medical guidance from doctors, home health aides and physical and/or occupational therapists will serve invaluable in the transition. You might have questions about how diseases might progress, how to make your caregiving experience easier and how to prevent injury to yourself and aging loved one. Researching the growing number of assistive devices also can be very helpful, as this technology can allow your loved one to assume more daily responsibility and to enjoy greater mobility in life.

Communication with Your Family
Communication in any family is tricky at times. Maneuvering emotionally-charged topics, like caregiving, can be especially difficult. Here are some proven strategies to help guide your conversation:

- If your loved one is battling memory loss, important conversations may be more complicated. Give yourself plenty of time, be patient with your loved one(s) and remove distractions from the room.

- Clearly convey your point of view without manipulating or coercing agreement. The recipient of care should be actively involved in the process as much as they can be.

- Listen carefully to others’ thoughts and ideas. Communicate and show respect for their thinking, even if you disagree.

- Plan important conversations ahead of time. Outline your main points so as not to do all the talking. Avoid blaming anyone or attempting to “win”

changes in sleep and weight, and losing interest or pleasure in activities. Without proper attention these indicators place you at risk for depression and anxiety. The following are some helpful strategies for dealing with caregiver stress:

- **Use teamwork** – Ask others how they would like to help, and let them. When family members choose their tasks, they are more likely to stick with them.

- **Say goodbye to guilt** – Guilt is never a helpful emotion. Not everything will be perfect, so focus on what you can do rather than the limitations. Remember, asking for help is a sign of great strength and humility.

- **Stay informed** – Many nonprofit organizations offer classes about aging, dementia and other caregiving topics.

- **Keep connections** – Family members may need ideas or help to figure out how to be involved. Maintain strong connections by keeping everyone informed. Don’t assume people aren’t interested if they don’t ask you for information.

- **Update your doctor** – Inform your doctor of your caregiving responsibilities so he or she can be on the lookout for caregiver stress indicators.

- **Be healthy** – Maintaining good sleep, eating and exercise habits are necessities for you. Do not feel guilty or apologize for taking care of yourself.

- **Seek support** – Knowing you are not alone is vital. There are many support groups, as well as individual counseling opportunities, that specifically cater to caregivers.

the argument. Remember, an honest and honorable conversation is the goal.

Care for the Caregiver
While the task of caregiving holds rewards like precious time and memories, it also may take a toll on your physical, mental and emotional health. You only will be able to care for another to the degree you care for yourself. Some caregiver stress symptoms are fatigue, irritability,
Remember, caring for an aging loved one is a “transitional” time. Essentially, roles are reversing as the adult child becomes the “parent,” and frustration and discomfort are common if dealing with an uncooperative family member. While there will be bumps in the road and sacrifices to be made, the opportunity to spend this limited time with your aging loved one can be a priceless gift.

Sources:
- www.alsc.dhs.wa.gov/caregiving/agingparent.htm

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Maximizing Your Elder Relatives’ Independence and Health

Keeping or restoring health in the later years often requires more effort and determination than when we are younger. You can help your elder relative or friend maximize their independence through planning, researching available community resources and solution-focused problem-solving. Here are some practical tips for you and your elderly loved one to help promote and maintain their independence:

**Eat a healthy diet.**
If your relative has medical problems, you can ask their physician if changes in diet should be made and whether you should consult a registered dietician for additional information. Consult with your local Area Agency on Aging for local congregate and home-delivered meal programs. In urban areas, grocery and restaurant delivery services may be available.

**Exercise.**
If your older relative or friend is reasonably healthy, he or she can begin a regular program of exercise including stretching, weight training and low-impact aerobics, after discussing it with his or her physician.

Exercise can help to avoid accidents, improve strength and mobility, lower blood pressure, and help to prevent or control some diseases. If your care receiver is frail or ill, you can ask the physician about what exercises may be appropriate. Your older relative or friend may want to begin such an exercise program under a physical therapist’s supervision. The physical therapist can show you how to do range of motion, stretching and strengthening exercises. Over time, these exercises can help to increase strength and mobility.

**Monitor.**
Monitor, in consultation with your relative’s primary care physician and pharmacist, both over-the-counter drugs and prescription medications to ensure that there are no adverse drug reactions or bad reactions between several drugs. Make sure that all medications are appropriate for your care receiver’s individual needs and that the rules for safely taking drugs are being followed.

**Get help.**
If an older relative is having trouble with everyday activities such as shopping, cooking and taking care of their home or themselves, homecare agencies can provide help. Services may include assistance with bathing, dressing, grooming, transportation, shopping, meal preparation, homemaking and other supportive services.

Volunteer chore programs are available in most communities to help seniors with general home maintenance tasks and chores. Consult with your local Area Agency on Aging for more information on available local services.

**Stay involved.**
Stay involved with family and friends. Encourage your elderly relative to take part in community activities,
such as going to senior center activities, volunteering, or participating in clubs or leagues. For isolated seniors, volunteer-friendly visitor programs are available in many communities.

If transportation is needed, volunteer escort services, paratransit, public transportation, taxi vouchers and other senior transportation options may be available. Contact your local Area Agency on Aging for details and availability.

**Keep an active mind.**

Pursue activities ranging from reading to card and board games, as well as using a computer.

**Learn about assistive devices.**

These can enhance your older relative’s or friend’s independence and safety. The U.S. Department of Education sponsors abledata.com, a website with a searchable database of 30,000 assistive technology products designed to help those with physical limitations to maintain their independence.

**Ensure home safety.**

Make your home safer with such modifications as ramps and low thresholds, better lighting and nonskid rugs to enhance safety and independence.

The National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modification’s website, homemods.org, features safety checklists and assessments, home modification tips for caregivers and a national directory of home modification programs. The National Association of Home Builders, nahb.org, features a national directory of contractors and remodelers who are Certified Aging in Place Specialists (CAPS) and specialize in remodeling and home modifications for seniors.

Medical alert or personal emergency response systems also can enhance home safety. Medical alert systems are a tool for those who are living independently at home but have an increased susceptibility to accident, illness or emergency situations. Medical alert systems allow for a rapid response to accidents and crisis situations by providing a quick link to emergency services.