

Facts About Caregivers and the Elderly

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

"Should Dad be forbidden to drive? Although his vision is poor and he's had one minor accident, he seems to drive the four blocks to the store okay."

"Mom needs 24-hour supervision. The only choices we have are for her to live with us or in a nursing home. But she and I just don't get along when we live together."

Do These Incidents Hit Home?

Situations like those described above are difficult for families. The decline of a parent's health or intellectual capabilities often requires adult sons and daughters to become involved in decisions about their parent's life.

As the population age 65 and older continues to increase, more and more families will be faced with providing care for an elderly family member. By the year 2000, persons age 65 and older are expected to represent 13 percent of the population. This percentage may climb to 20 percent by 2030.

A child born in 1991 can expect to live 75.5 years, about 28 years longer than a child born in 1900. The major part of this increase has occurred because of declining death rates for children and young adults, and improved health care and nutrition. As a result of these trends, helping an elderly relative has become a common experience, one that most people can expect to face sometime in their lives.

Who Are the Caregivers?

Caregiving responsibilities are usually assumed by the following people, listed in order of occurrence:

- A spouse
- A daughter
- A daughter-in-law
- Another relative (i.e., sibling, grandchild, niece, or nephew)
- Neighbors or friends

In addition, caregivers are usually:

- female
- over age 65
- poor or nearly poor
- self-described as having fair to poor health

What Are the Living Arrangements?

- 75 percent of elderly men live with their spouse
- 41 percent of elderly women live with their spouse
- 7 percent of elderly men live with a relative
- 17 percent of elderly women live with a relative
- 18 percent of elderly men live alone or with nonrelatives
- 43 percent of elderly women live alone or with nonrelatives

What are the Benefits?

Caring for an elderly parent, relative, or friend can be satisfying and enjoyable, often resulting in an improved relationship for both parties. Most children help their parents willingly when needed and derive satisfaction from doing so. Caregiving can also serve as a substitute for a void in someone's life and enhance feelings of self-worth. For elderly spouses, the caregiver role may help to compensate for the loss of other roles as one ages, providing a new sense of usefulness. In some instances, accepting a caregiving role helps put other stresses in perspective.

How to Manage?

Realize from the outset that if a parent has always been demanding and stubborn you are not going to change that. Caregiving brings stress; learn to identify the sources of the stress and control it by:

1. Setting realistic goals and expectations
2. Establishing your limits
3. Asking for and accepting help
4. Taking care of yourself by
 - Expressing your feelings
 - Maintaining your health
 - Taking time for yourself
5. Involving other people by
 - Holding a family conference
 - Seeking professional assistance
 - Using your community resources

Care-giving should not be based only on the needs of the receiver. You must attend to your needs and the needs of your family members.

Know that mistakes will be made and you will wish that you had done some things differently. Recognize that you are human. Admit to the mistakes, learn from them, and then go on.

Reference

You and Your Aging Parents, K. Beckham and J. Nolan, 1991.
Coping with Caregiving, Pacific Northwest Extension Publication.
A Profile of Older Americans, 1994, AARP.
The 36 Hour Day