

# Care for the elder caregiver



As family members grow older, their health can decline, making them more reliant on others—most likely their children or other relatives. For many of us, caring for an elderly loved one is an increasing reality. Does this situation apply to you? If so, here is some insight on three caregiving stages.

## The Early Stage: What happens?

You step into the role of caring for an older relative. This tends to follow a crisis such as a fall or escalating memory or behavioral problems. The normal ways your family has functioned may no longer be effective. *During the first stage of caregiving, you and your loved one both may experience a variety of emotions, including surprise, fear, denial, confusion and sadness.*

## The Middle Stage: What changes?

By now, your loved one may have become more accepting of help, and new family routines will have evolved for caregiving tasks. You may be giving up time with friends and family, as well as for hobbies, recreation and other activities. *Emotions you could feel during this stage include frustration, guilt, resentment and anxiety about conflicting demands.*

## The Late Stage: How do I respect the needs of my loved one?

In final stages of life, your loved one is in decline. Questions of quality of life versus longevity must be sensitively addressed. If the family has planned ahead, legal documents such as a living will, power of attorney and health proxy might already be in place to support difficult decisions. Hospice care can help provide a loving environment for the end of life. *Emotions that occur during the late stage include sadness, guilt, surrender, regrets, relief and closure.*



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# Head off caregiver burnout

## Begin with a family meeting

Try to set your family's expectations. This will help ease problems in the months ahead. Call together the family before it's time to make any high-impact decisions. Include aging parent(s), siblings and other family members.

## Don't make promises you can't keep

If you are unsure about the level of care you can provide, don't make commitments you might not be able to meet. For example, don't tell your mother she will never end up in a nursing home. If you are working full time and her health declines, a skilled nursing facility could be the best option for ensuring she receives the care she needs. Also, family situations may change and make it impossible to provide care you expect to give in the future.

## Find out what social services are offered

Some families can afford to pay for the services of a social worker or nurse. If you can't bear this expense, many lower-cost services for the aging are supplied by governmental and nonprofit agencies.

## Look to your religious group

A religious community can be a tremendous source of volunteer talent. People may be willing to give their time by visiting, fixing meals, cleaning, doing home repairs, and providing transportation to stores and medical appointments. Use these resources so you don't have to shoulder the entire burden.

## Tap into the power of a self-help group

Extended family members and friends can provide advice and emotional support. But sometimes, a self-help group can be even more beneficial—especially if family relationships are part of the problem. A self-help group can connect you to other people who are facing similar experiences, and it can also offer a fresh perspective.

## Be sensitive to the primary caregiver

No matter how many adult children are in a family, one adult child often emerges as the primary caregiver. If another family member is carrying most of the load, do whatever you can to pitch in and help.