

Helping family members as they age can be rewarding

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Once upon a time, your parents hovered over you as you attempted your first wobbly steps. Now, you stay close by as they take their own wobbly steps on walkers and canes.

If you're providing care to a senior relative, you have lots of company. According to a report by the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, about 44 million people in the United States are providing unpaid care to a family member, friend or neighbor. And half of all caregivers also work outside the home.

In the past, caregivers have been mainly middle-aged women sandwiched between other responsibilities, such as driving a teen to soccer practice and polishing a presentation to the board. Now, studies show more and more men are stepping up to the plate. In fact, more than 40 percent of today's caregivers are men.

"Almost everyone is a caregiver — either they have been in the past, they are currently or they will be in the future," says Marie A. Bernard, MD, deputy director of the National Institute on Aging.

Ideally, adult children should broach the subject of planning for the future when their aging parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles or other family members are still healthy.

"It's a tough conversation to initiate, and many a parent doesn't want to talk about it," Bernard says.

If a parent can't make these decisions, hopefully the adult child who is caring for them had a strong enough relationship prior to their parent becoming ill to act on their behalf, "in keeping with what they know of their parent," Bernard says.

"Every adult child should have a conversation with their parent when people are healthy," she adds.

Health care providers recommend developing a health care proxy and an advance directive while relatives are still healthy enough to be able to make good decisions. A health care proxy is when you designate someone you trust to act on your behalf should you become unable to make decisions. An advance directive includes explicit directions of how you would like to be treated in the case of a potentially life-threatening illness.

Caregiving across the miles

In today's transient world, you might be one of the 7 million adults in the United States acting as a long-distance caregiver who cares for an aging relative who lives an hour or more away.

When you are with your relative, make your visit count. Go through the house in search of possible hazards, such as loose rugs and railings and unsafe clutter. Make sure there's a grab bar for your mom or dad to hold onto in the bathtub, and another one by the toilet. Put fresh batteries in the smoke and carbon monoxide alarms. And if possible, be an angel during your visit and provide a breather to siblings who live nearby and bear more of the day-to-day burden.



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>> When parents age, adult children may have to adjust to the caregiver role.

Deciding who does what

If you have siblings or other relatives or friends nearby who want to help out, make a plan of action based on everyone's strengths and availabilities. The person who is handy with a hammer, for example, can take on routine repairs around the house.

Someone with free time during the day can help with shopping, doctors' appointments and fun outings. And don't forget to enlist older children in caregiving tasks. Helping to care for grandma and grandpa helps build empathy and self confidence in young people, while giving you a needed respite.

Taking care of yourself

Providing care for an elderly relative might have you on call 24 hours a day, and the stress will build up. Neglecting your own physical and emotional health is a common characteristic of caregivers. Delegate and accept help. Take time for rest and renewal. Share your feelings with others, and make your health a priority.

"Caregivers often end up developing illnesses themselves related to the stress of caregiving, and thus those caregivers need to take advantage of support groups and opportunities for respite in order to be able to continue to be effective in their caregiving role," Bernard says. "It's a challenge when you have a loved one who has developed significant physical or cognitive frailties, and you shouldn't feel that you are alone in dealing with that. There are lots of other people in similar situations, and taking advantage of resources and support groups can be very effective."



Finding the silver lining

Caring for an older family member can be a "strengthening, affirming interaction for an adult child," according to Marie A. Bernard of the National Institute on Aging. She said the situation can be a positive one.

"It's a wonderful opportunity to get to know your mother, your father, your uncle much better," Bernard says. "They have so much to share and I would encourage people going into the caregiving role to look forward to those benefits."



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>> For more caregiving tips, visit www.nihseniorhealth.gov