

Involving Others

When you are providing care for an older parent, the more help you can receive, the better. Involving others provides a broader base of support for parents, as well as relieving adult children of some of the tasks and stresses. The more help you get, the less likely you are to burn out, and the better equipped you are to stay involved for the long haul.

Surveys show that most caregivers do have help — and many feel that other family members do their share. Like so much of caregiving, however, getting help and using it productively involves people skills. While family members are not the only ones who can assist, working with them constructively can be a particular challenge. Although those we love can be a wonderful source of emotional support, the reality is that in times of stress we often have less to give to each other — and old family roles and resentments can surface. This tip sheet has ideas to help families overcome barriers and build a supportive network adult children and their parents need.

Issues You May Face

In most families, one person assumes a primary role, because he or she is closest geographically, closer to the parent emotionally, or simply a take-charge person. While this role is probably the

most time-consuming and stressful, all those involved face similar issues, including the following:

- **Involving parents in decisions about their care.** Unless your parents are severely incapacitated, they should always retain decision-making power and be a central part of all discussions and actions surrounding their care. However, keeping parental preferences in view adds to the complexity of eldercare. It also can be difficult for adult children to identify the solutions and types of assistance their parents will find acceptable.
- **Determining whom to involve.** Immediate family and close friends are obvious choices for help. However, distant relatives, acquaintances (such as the people in your father's civic groups or your mother's circle from church), neighbors, and community organizations also can provide needed support. Even your own friends, particularly if they are or have been in the same situation, may be able to help. While not all of these folks may volunteer for a job, they may be very willing to become involved. Suggest that they help in smaller ways, such as walking the dog, running an errand, or watering the garden.

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- **Feeling reluctant to ask for help.** You hesitate to ask your brother for help, fearing that he will refuse and that the confrontation will harm your relationship. Your husband is already fixing more meals at home, doing more with the children, and having less social life because of your responsibilities with your father. Can you really ask him to do any more? You don't even know your parents' friends, so how can you approach them for assistance? Feelings like these are natural, and in some cases you may be right to hold back. However, some people may need only a little encouragement to take on a task, and others may feel hurt or left out if you don't seek their help.
- **Dealing with changed relationships.** Taking care of a parent can affect all your relationships. Brothers and sisters who may have been at the fringes of your life now take center stage. Your spouse and children may feel neglected, and any existing tension in your marriage is likely to increase. Colleagues at your job may provide a diversion, but even if they are sympathetic to your added demands, they still need your work on time. Walking tightropes like these can increase your stress level.
- **Joining the "sandwich generation."** When you have both older parents and children who need your time and attention, you may feel caught in the middle and pulled from both sides with conflicting demands. There's no chance to do any task as well as you'd like. There's no time left for you. This increasingly common situation can leave you feeling guilty

and inadequate, yet it may not occur to you to ask for help with either set of responsibilities.

Getting Help

Getting help is one of the most important jobs you will tackle. Here are some steps you can take to make the job manageable and get the outcome you want:

- **Talk with your parents** about the importance of working together as partners in meeting their needs. Your parents are probably concerned about being a burden and losing control of their lives. Talk openly about the issues and agree on ground rules, including establishing your own limits so your parents won't have unrealistic expectations.
- **Make a list** of what needs to be done and plan for it. Both your parents and others who will take on key responsibilities should be involved in planning. This organized approach puts you in control and reduces the stress that comes from loose ends. It also ensures that your parents get all the assistance they need. Back-up plans, where possible, are a good idea to develop. In fact, being available for back-up duty is a valuable role someone may be willing to play. Be sure to write down your plans and schedules, and give all those involved a copy.
- **Don't accept excuses** without suggesting other tasks a person could do. A sibling who lives far away can still help with jobs such as paying bills, talking with doctors, researching local agencies, or initiating regular phone visits. People with childcare

responsibilities can still cook meals occasionally, bring the children for visits as appropriate, and bring the children while they take Mom to the bank or video store. Perhaps the children could even occasionally help with yard work or house cleaning.

- **Contact community and other nonfamily sources of help.** There are many ways others can help.
Approaches to consider: Ask a parent's friend to pick up groceries or get books from the library, a neighbor's child to adopt your parent as a grandparent or a local teenager to help with yard work (perhaps for a manageable fee). See if a civic group can provide volunteer home repair or transportation services or if those your parent sees often (the paper boy, a barber, or an apartment superintendent) can call you if anything seems wrong. Ask the post office if there is a program in your parent's area for mail carriers to look for problems and check on older residents. Ask your friends to help occasionally, for example, providing back-up child care or transportation when you need to be with your parent; and ask a group of people in a similar situation to start a cooperative arrangement in which you share mutual tasks such as information-gathering and coping strategies.
- **Hold family meetings** as needed to keep everyone constructively involved in providing care. Every few months, reassess your parent's situation, which is likely to change over time. Develop a list of questions and concerns, such as health, legal, economic, or housing issues and problems that have occurred

in giving or getting help and following the schedule. Bring up any new factors that have arisen since the last meeting. Discussing such issues openly avoids hurt feelings and suspicions and gets problems solved.

Approaches to consider: Limit participation to siblings or others directly involved in care. Let people who cannot attend participate by phone. Choose a neutral party to moderate if necessary to keep meetings constructive. Have a clear agenda for each meeting, and agree on rules of conduct at the outset (no interrupting; time limits on speakers; clarify legitimate differences, but avoid arguing; stick to facts, not opinions or generalities; don't try to resolve old family wounds, just focus on the task of taking care of the parent).

- **Involve your spouse.**
Approaches to consider: Clarify both of your responsibilities concerning both sets of parents. For example, do you each take care of only your own parents, or help with both sets of parents? Will each spouse go with the other on visits to parents? Will your spouse support you? Be specific about how your spouse can help (suggest particular tasks you need done), and thank him or her for all efforts. Encourage your spouse to talk about his or her feelings, recognizing that your additional responsibilities also affect your spouse in a major way. Keep your marriage a priority, and make time to be together.

■ **Involve your children.**

Approaches to consider: Be honest with your children about the situation, and answer their questions. Take time to listen to their concerns. Spend time doing something fun with them, no matter how tight time is. Ask them if they'd like to help out with your parents sometimes; even a toddler can help Grandma feel loved. Teenagers may enjoy driving their grandparents to the store or on a social outing.

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