



we can receive. There is the possibility that, in this time, we will have positive interactions with our parents that we never had before. There are opportunities here for communication and intimacy that may never occur again. Also, as we take care of our aging parents, we serve as a role model for others—perhaps even for our own children—demonstrating the kind of behavior we wish to inspire in them.

## Speaking about End of Life Issues

Discussions about end-of-life issues can seem morbid or uncomfortable but they can also create a great sense of relief for us and our parents. Knowing our parents' expressed wishes can avoid great heartache and legal problems in the future. For our parents, it is comforting to be involved in the planning and to know their wishes have been heard.

Nonetheless, broaching this subject is difficult for everyone involved. It is helpful to hold these discussions when there is no present emergency. If we have trouble getting the conversation started, ask a family member or member of the clergy to assist.

Some questions we might consider discussing are:

- Are there important things you would like to be sure you say to certain people at this time?
- Is there anyone you would particularly like to see or speak to on the telephone?
- Is there a message for a child, grandchild or friend that you want to write down?
- Are there particular items you would like to give specific individuals (now or after your death)?
- Are there any charities that you feel strongly about supporting?
- Have you written a will, and if so, where is it kept?
- What interventions would you want doctors to make in the event of brain damage, a prolonged coma, or a persistent vegetative state?

- Where would you like to be buried?
- What kind of funeral service would you like? •
- What's most important to you in how you are remembered?

Along with getting the details of how they want their affairs handled, this is also a good time for us to express our love and gratitude to our parents for a lifetime of effort.

## Remember to Take Care of the Caretaker

It is both time consuming and difficult to be the adult child of aging parents. Sometimes this happens while we are still caring for our own children, putting us into a dual caring role that has been called "the sandwich generation."

We need to find a delicate balance between caring for ourselves and caring for others. It is important for us to get sufficient sleep, exercise, eat healthfully, and have fun. We may find it useful to gently set limits as to what we cannot or do not wish to do. Try to add some laughter in our days.

It can also be helpful to spend time in meditation and prayer. We may also find comfort and support in others, such as siblings, spouse, friends or clergy. Join a support group for caretakers or one related to a particular illness or disease. Caring for an aging parent is both a challenge and an opportunity. We can meet this challenge by gathering together your inner strength, faith, family, and friends.



# Caring for Aging Parents

[www.baycrest.org](http://www.baycrest.org)



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## Honor Your Father and Mother

Everyone with aging parents has a story to tell. They often confide that, "I have become the parent and my parent has become my child." Although it is true that aging entails many losses, the essential role of parent and child do not reverse. Caretaking functions and responsibilities often change dramatically, but the mutual respect due to the roles of parent and child remain in force. That is, parents remain the parents, and children remain the children.

Perhaps the Jewish teaching "Honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12) refers to adult children caring for their aging parents during this challenging transition, as we negotiate and agonize over life-changing decisions.

## Although We Age, We Remain Who We Are

Although relationships with our parents can improve over time, it is not uncommon to continue relating to each other using the same family dynamics we experienced while growing up. We would like the parent-child relationship to take on a new and better framework as we grow older, but when we are actually together, we often feel pulled back into familiar, frustrating interactions.

In order to break this cycle and appreciate the relationship for what it is today, we must give up the image of the parents we wished we had. To aid this healing, some people find it helpful to visualize their anger or negative feelings as

a package attached to a balloon. When we release the package, the balloon carries the anger away.

The next step in establishing new family dynamics is to find fresh ways of communicating when together. We might try talking to our parents about their past, about their lives before we were born. Through thoughtful conversation, we may work at resolving some of the issues that have been on our minds regarding our relationship with them. We may find out things we didn't know before or confirm views we already had.

Just being together without extensive talking can also be rewarding. Engaging in activities that are pleasant or entraining for both parent and adult child will help focus attention in the present as well as give us and our parents new memories to reminisce about later. Activities might be as simple as attending a grandchild's school event, visiting a park or local zoo, browsing a bookstore, or going to the movies.

## Respecting Safety and Independence

It is hard to balance our own needs with those of our aging parents. We may feel like we are walking on a tightrope as we consider our parents' sense of their best interests, our own judgment of what is best for them, and our own self-interest. Older people want to live their lives to the fullest for as long as they are able, but are often willing to make life easier for their adult children, so long as it is not at the cost of their own independence.

It is important to differentiate between serious health risks our parents face and honest differences of opinion. Certain issues such as safe driving may be resolved more calmly by including a neutral third party, such as their physician. And issues of lost independence may be addressed by working with them to protect personal boundaries, such as privacy concerns and seeing friends. For example, we might say, "I know you're worried about seeing your friends,

and I'll be able to drive you once a week to your bridge game." Compromise and mutual respect are helpful in easing concerns for both parties.

## Working with Siblings

When parents have more than one child, it is their dream that siblings will be close and loving. They imagine their children will help each other in times of need. And sometimes things work out that way. But the reality that each sibling will shoulder the exact equal amount of work isn't common. There are many reasons that care-giving responsibilities do not divide equally, including commuting distance, life style choices, special needs in a particular family, stereotypic view on gender, differing financial responsibilities, and personality dynamics from the past. As we learn in so many cases, life isn't always fair.

It is particularly important at this time to keep the line of communication open, acknowledging that the job of caring for our parents is important to all of us. The last thing our parents want is the dissolution of their children's relationship in a dispute over their care.

There are ways that we can ease tension between siblings over the dispersions of responsibilities. If we are the sibling who can't be present, acknowledge our limitations to our family members. Offer to help in other ways, perhaps by doing onerous paperwork or offering more financial assistance. Set blocks of time when we can be present so that your siblings can take a break.

If we are the sibling who is shouldering the greater burden, consider the tangible benefits

