



Caregiving and Changing Relationships

If you are helping a friend or older relative who can no longer manage certain tasks, you are a caregiver. As family members age and become more dependent, family caregivers experience many emotions. Some are new, and some carry over from past experiences. As you take on the role of caregiver, you may experience changes in your relationship with the person receiving care, according to Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist in aging.

Caregiving can vary widely from one situation to another. Some caregivers provide minimal assistance such as driving an older person to appointments or running errands. Others are full-time caregivers who provide round-the-clock assistance.

"Often caregivers find themselves in a role-reversal situation," Brintnall-Peterson says. "Now they are caring for aging parents, a spouse, friend, or another relative who once spent time caring for them."

These changing relationships can cause feelings of fear, guilt, or anger as you care for a dependent adult. These emotions are normal, says Brintnall-Peterson. It is not easy to deal with the emotions of changing relationships, but there are a few things caregivers can do to respond positively.

The University of Illinois Extension publication, "Changing Relationships in Caregiving," offers these tips to help caregivers cope with their emotions:

- Adjust your perceptions and expectations of the care-receiver, realizing that he may no longer be able to respond to you as he once did.
- Express your feelings to someone who will listen and understand. Sharing emotions can make it easier to deal with changing relationships.
- Hold a family meeting to discuss changes and share feelings. During this time, each person's feelings should be acknowledged. Ask questions and seek input from everyone involved in the relationship.
- Acknowledge your fears. You may fear losing the love of the care-receiver and, ultimately, the care-receiver, upon their death.
- Realize that it is normal to be angry with the care-receiver as well as with yourself. Even people who had positive relationships can still feel angry when their lives are disrupted and they are tired, worried, and pulled in many directions.
- Understand that feeling guilty is a common experience. Guilt may or may not be based on anything you did or did not do. Sometimes the person we care for uses guilt feelings as a way to get more attention or to get you to do as she wishes.

You can sometimes stop this manipulative behavior by providing more help and attention to the care-receiver. However, it may be necessary to have a family discussion about this. Explain that there are limits to what can be done.

Care-receivers have emotions, too, that often surface if they feel uncomfortable because they are no longer independent and have to depend on others for care. Here are some ideas to help the care-receiver feel better about needing help.

- Encourage the care-receiver to provide as much self-care as possible.
- Ask questions and seek opinions from the care-receiver to increase feelings of value and self-worth.

- Keep communications open.
 - Trust and respect each other.
 - Acknowledge and resolve negative feelings.
 - Accept the care-receiver as he or she is today, forgiving past mistakes and hard feelings.
- Changing relationships can be especially stressful when the changing relationships are due to dependence or role reversal in a caregiving situation. It is normal to have these feelings as you care for an older adult or disabled person. It is important to acknowledge these feelings and talk about them with a friend, spiritual leader, or human service provider. Keep family communication as open and positive as possible.

Provided by Mary Brintnall-Peterson, Ph.D., Program Specialist in Aging at the University of Wisconsin-Extension. For more information or questions, contact Mary by phone (608) 262-8083 or by email at: mary.brintnall-peterson@ces.uwex.edu.

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