



## Older Adult Caregivers Can Benefit from Coping Strategies

Millions of Americans today are caring for aging relatives. Being a caregiver can be both stressful and depressing, especially if your loved one has a degenerative illness, such as Alzheimer's Disease.

However, researchers have found that while some people adapt poorly to the role of caregiving, others are able to remain resilient and finding - meaning in their roles. According to Carol J. Farran, a care giving researcher with the Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Alzheimer's Disease Center and a professor at Rush University College of

Nursing, caregivers adapt best when they have two attributes: a sense of hope and the ability to adopt coping mechanisms.

"It is not uncommon to see adult caregivers suffering from depression and immobilizing despair," says Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension specialist on aging issues. "The research seems to show that caregivers who are able to accept the reality of the disease, yet are able to step beyond loss and powerlessness, are the ones who cope best."

Farran's research shows that people are able to find hope, even in the face of degenerative illness, in a variety of ways. Caregivers who retain a sense of connection with their aging relative can experience a sense of satisfaction from that relationship.

For those who are providing care to loved ones with advanced dementia, the caregivers often have to seek outside affirmation. Still others find hope from deep within themselves, often through their religious and/or spiritual beliefs.

Farran and colleague Eleanora Keane-Hagerty developed these "12 Steps for Caregivers" that can help them develop necessary coping strategies:

1. Try to control how the disease affects you and your relative. You can't control the course of the disease, but you may be able to control certain aspects of care and be able to manage your own attitude towards challenging behaviors.
2. Take care of yourself. You can't care well for others if you aren't in good physical and emotional shape yourself.
3. Take time to enjoy a few things that are really important to you.
4. Try to eat right and exercise a few times each week.
5. Simplify your lifestyle. You need to prioritize your time and attention, dropping those things that simply aren't important.
6. Allow others to help you. Asking for help isn't a sign of weakness. Learn to accept help graciously.
7. Take one day at a time. Focus on short-term issues, rather than projecting into the future. Structure each day. Providing structure helps your loved one and yourself.
8. Maintain a sense of humor. Remember that your relative's behaviors and emotions are affected by his or her illness.
9. Educate yourself about the disease so you won't take bad language or disruptive behavior personally.
10. Focus on and enjoy what your relative can still do, rather than dwelling on the past.

11. Look for other relationships for love and support. As a degenerative disease progresses, you can't depend on your loved one for gratitude and appreciation. Friends, neighbors, members of your faith community and other relatives can offer affirmation and support.
12. Remind yourself that you are doing the very best you can. You can't handle every situation perfectly. Focus on what you do right, rather than the mistakes you make.

For those who believe in a higher power, remember that is available to you. Many caregivers believe their Higher Power has helped them in tough situations.

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