



Strategies Can Make Adult Caregiving Less Stressful

One of the most challenging transitions adults can make is taking on the role of caregiver for an older relative. But keeping some priorities in mind and taking the time to explore alternatives can make the process less stressful for everyone, according to a University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist on aging. "Throughout the whole process, it is always important to ensure that the older adult you are caring for can maintain his or her dignity and their independence," said Mary Brintnall-Peterson. "This may mean recognizing that some of their wishes may not seem like good decisions to you as a caregiver." For instance, Brintnall-Peterson said an older adult may want to continue living alone in her house after her spouse dies, even if the house seems unsafe. "The caregiver can make the house as safe as possible -- check for possible safety hazards through the house such as: loose throw rugs, clutter or cords that could cause someone to fall. Once the house is safe, you may then have to back off. These aren't easy decisions to make, but if you don't include the older adults wishes in your decisions, in the end no one is satisfied."

Likewise, Brintnall-Peterson said it is important for caregivers to maintain their own sanity and sense of self. If a caregiver is stressed, he or she can't provide quality care. "Caregivers can't do everything themselves," Brintnall-Peterson said. "Caregiving needs to be done in a variety of ways, using resources like respite care, meal and transportation programs, emergency response systems, and informal help from neighbors and other family members. Even if a neighbor or relative calls the older adult once a day, it can ease the caregiver's role."

When becoming a caregiver for the first time, Brintnall-Peterson suggests assessing the situation first. Will this be a short-term situation, or will the older adult need long-term care?

What kinds of care will the individual need? Will it include financial help, nursing care, different housing, household assistance? Next, try to find out what types of services are available in the community. What will they cost, and when are they available? Is there a waiting list?

Once you have gathered information, develop a plan of action. This may include setting up services, finding sources of formal and informal support, and making contact with other family members to work together on options. "On-going communication with everyone who touches the older adult's life is essential," Brintnall-Peterson said. "Family members, friends, neighbors, support services, physicians and others may all be able to lend support and insights in how best to help and work with the person you are caring for."

Once the caregiver does make some decisions, however, Brintnall-Peterson cautioned that plans may have to change a few weeks or months down the road. The older adult may have changes in health or other circumstances that require different decisions. Or, the caregiver may decide the existing plan isn't working well. "Keeping options open and realizing that care giving is a time consuming process can help you keep things in perspective," Brintnall-Peterson said.

UW-Extension has developed a series of publications to help caregivers make informed decisions. The publications in the "ElderCare: Choices and Decisions" series are:

- "Planning for Financial Cost of Caregiving," (B3603-1).
- "Locating Community Resources," (B3603-2).
- "Considering Housing Options," (B3603-3).
- "Maintaining Nutrition for the Older Adult," (B3603-4).
- "Caring for the Caregiver," (B3603-5).
- "Understanding Alzheimer's Disease," (B3603-6).

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