

# Aging Parents

Becoming a caregiver to parents involves major changes for all concerned - physically, emotionally, socially and financially. Learning to cope with the changes in a healthy way is important to ensure you and your aging parents can live in a mutually loving and giving relationship.

If you are concerned about your relationship with your aging parents, we hope this pamphlet will help you and your parents adjust to your new roles.

## The changing picture of aging

People today live longer than ever before. Most of us will spend nearly one third of our life as "retirees" or "senior citizens." Four or even five-generation families are no longer unheard of.

But as we live longer, the chances grow that we will some day need help caring for ourselves. Today, many adult daughters and sons find themselves called upon to help care for their aging parents. The commitment they have to make may be for a short time or it may last for years. It changes the roles, responsibilities and feelings within the family and can be complicated and confusing.

## How to keep the quality in family relationships

At the same time, caring for an aging parent can also benefit the family. It can bridge the gaps among generations. Family support systems can be strengthened as members learn to prepare themselves for their own aging. How can you get the best out of this new relationship?

- Encourage without giving advice. Advice from adult sons and daughters is a tricky proposition and best avoided unless you are sure it has been asked for. It is generally better to let an outside person be the advisor.
- Accept differences of opinions, values, habits, likes and dislikes between you and your parents. There is often a "generation gap" between parents and children, regardless of how old they are. Respect these differences.

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- Keep humour and fun alive in the family. A shared laugh can do wonders to ease tension, build closeness, and even improve health.
- Recognize that grandchildren and grandparents may have a special relationship. If neither has the burden of responsibility for the other, they are free to enjoy each other's company and share ideas and experiences.

### What can you do for your parents?

Care-giving involves difficult decisions which should be handled with as much thought and discussion as possible. Do not jump into drastic changes, like having your parent move into your home, because you feel guilty or pressured, or as a "quick fix." Be realistic about your own abilities, desires and limitations, as well as those of your family members. Weigh the options carefully.

- Consider these issues as you take on increased care of your parent:  
What can your parents reasonably expect from you?
- What can you reasonably expect from your parents?
- Listening is an important part of caring. Listen to your parents. You may be one of the few who does.
- Independence is key to mental and physical health. Encourage and support your parents' independence.
- Let your parents know about community services or assistance available to them so they can make informed choices for themselves.
- Encourage your parents to discuss sensitive issues, like disability, nursing homes, even dying, if and when they seem interested in such discussions.
- Learn what the legal system has to offer you and your parents. Options like a power of attorney may help to manage your parents' finances and their future.

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### **What can you do for yourself?**

To cope well, it helps to separate the "person" (your parent) from the "process" (normal aging).

Beware of stereotypes - both you and your parent need to be on guard against the myth that old age is an illness. This is far from true. Most seniors are well, active and mentally fit. Some changes normally occur as we age. For example, we experience a gradual need for more light, a decreased hearing range, changes in the sense of taste and smell, and a general decrease in the efficiency of the body's organs and systems. Adapting to these changes is easier once we understand them.

You may find yourself feeling trapped and guilty as you try to juggle the multiple demands, stresses and responsibilities of your new situation. This can threaten not only your health, but your marriage, job, relationship with your children, and financial security. Be on the lookout for signs of stress and burnout. Symptoms may include: depression, constant fatigue, poor concentration, hostility, low self-esteem and / or physical illness.

You may need to pay more attention to your own independence. Do not become too involved in your parents' day-to-day activities at the expense of your own independence. Talk to them honestly and confidently about your needs and feelings while listening to and respecting what they have to say about theirs.

Caregivers often lack role models. Joining a caregiver group where you can share ideas, information, concerns and support can be invaluable. A caregiver group can also help you develop skills such as assertiveness and stress management, and teach you how to express your feelings.

### **What if your parent becomes ill?**

Although most older adults are well and active, some medical problems are more common in later years - illnesses such as heart disease, arthritis, cancer and dementia.

You can help by accepting the diagnosis, disheartening as this may be, and by acknowledging your parent's fears and anxiety about it. Denying the

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seriousness of the illness may block the communication that you and your parent need at this difficult time.

Mental health is as important for older adults as it is for everyone else. We all need self-esteem and a sense of independence. Depression is a risk of older age, particularly when one has suffered losses. Depression may be part of a physical illness or an effect of medication. As a family member, you may be able to spot signs of emotional, mental or behavioral change that point to depression. It can be treated successfully - do not settle for the excuse that "it's just old age."

Coping with a parent with dementia (such as Alzheimer's Disease) is one of the most difficult challenges one can face. It is vital to draw upon all support systems - professional and informal - to help you and your parent through the hardship. Knowledge and expertise in this field are increasing rapidly and can help you and your parent enjoy the best possible quality of life.

If, together, you decide a care facility is the best option, take the time to explore the choices, talk with staff, and involve your parent. Expect a period of adjustment to the change, for both of you. Try to avoid dwelling on feelings of guilt or failure; focus on the benefits of the new arrangement.

Giving your parent love and care is good for both of you. It is easier if you both take advantage of health, financial, legal, housing and recreational support services. Most communities have well developed services for older adults.

### Do you need more help?

If you are dealing with aging parents and feel you need more assistance than friends and family can provide, contact a community organization, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, which can help you find additional support.