

Coping With Caregiving

Life changes in a big way when you become a family caregiver. Your transition to a primary caregiving role may occur in a gradual way or be a sudden development. Whatever the timing or circumstances might be, your new responsibilities can seem overwhelming.

Caregiving support might be needed for one of your elder family members. You may be helping someone who has a chronic condition such as multiple sclerosis, cancer, Alzheimer's disease or other disability. Regardless, there are many things to think about as you begin to arrange care for your loved one. Then you face the ongoing challenge of balancing your caregiving role with that of family, work and other activities.

This issue of *Your Source* includes:

- A look at the different stages of caregiving
- Advice on setting boundaries and balancing your life
- Ways to improve your communication with health care providers

As a team member, parent, spouse or grandparent—as well as caregiver—you may often feel pulled in many different directions. It can be hard to do everything others want or need you to do. But by carefully managing your caregiving resources, while remembering to take care of yourself in the process, you can better manage the daily challenges of caregiving.

Go Online Today! Log on to access *The Caregiving Journey* and other helpful resources in the *Spotlight* section. Share this information with your family members and others involved in helping.



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Improving Provider/ Caregiver Communications

In caring for a loved one, sometimes you'll work with health care professionals such as physicians or specialists. Improving your communication with these providers can mean better care for the patient, less stress for the caregiver, and better use of everyone's time.

Here are some ways to improve your communication with doctors:

- Prepare by writing your questions down in advance so you won't forget them.
- Be clear and concise about what you want to say to the doctor.
- Educate yourself about your loved one's disease or disability; there is a wealth of information available on the Internet about specific conditions.
- Recognize that not all questions have answers—especially those beginning with “why.”
- Separate any caregiving frustration or anger that you have from your feelings about the doctor. You are both on the same side.
- Seek the doctor's advice about other caregiving resources such as in-home care, community services, support groups, and help with paying for medications.
- Appreciate what the doctor is doing to help, and say thank you from time to time.

Understanding the Stages of Caregiving

The journey of providing care to a loved one is difficult but also rewarding. While every situation is different, veterans of caregiving have identified a number of stages most caregivers go through. In reviewing these stages, you may see yourself at a particular point. You might also find useful ways to think about caregiving.

I may help a relative soon

You and your loved one realize you may soon begin your caregiving role. You both take steps to prepare for that process. This is the time to get the care recipient's affairs in order.

I am beginning to help

You may begin providing meals and running errands at first. At this time, you should educate yourself on all aspects of your loved one's condition and decide how best to help. Join support groups that focus on specific illnesses or on caregiving in general. Don't go it alone.

I am fully involved in helping

You are providing all aspects of daily care to a loved one. This role is now central in your life. Establish and agree upon a daily routine. Determine limits of care with which the two of you are comfortable. Accept help from family and friends, or hire a respite care provider. Take breaks from your responsibilities. Re-examine your plans for the future.

My role is changing

Your caregiver duties are coming to an end, either because you can no longer continue in your role, or because the care recipient's remaining time is coming to an end. Allow yourself to reflect on shared memories.

My caregiving has ended

You are moving forward in your life now. You are able to look back on your caregiving years with happy thoughts of the one for whom you cared. You can now help and give advice to others who may be starting their own caregiving journey.

When meeting with a doctor to discuss your loved one's care, it's best to:

- A. Have just one member of the family handle the communication.
- B. Include several family members so that the doctor gets a complete picture.

The correct answer is A. Appoint one family member as the main contact with health care professionals when possible. This will avoid confusion and save time for the doctors and nurses. The appointed person can clearly communicate all information and necessary decisions to be made with the rest of the family.

Now That's an Idea!

Setting Boundaries

*Make your limits as clear as possible—*The best time to discuss caregiving boundaries—such as who is responsible for what and when—is at the start, when the caregiving relationship is fairly new.

*Recognize signs that you need time off and more support—*Signs can include anger, fatigue, depression, losing sleep, and other health problems.

*Take time to yourself to recharge your batteries—*Maybe you need a half hour walk each day, or a weekly outing to the movies or dinner with a friend. Schedule them!

*Arrange caregiving coverage—*Find someone to be with your loved one while you do your outside activities.