

## ***Attending to Aging Loved Ones***

While we understand that aging is an inevitable aspect of life, how it will affect our older loved ones and what it will entail for us is difficult to know. We tend to think of aging in terms of the distant future, using words like *eventually*, *someday*, and *one of these days* when considering the prospect of becoming a caregiver.

Unfortunately, though, getting older doesn't just happen in one day and caregiving often sneaks up slowly over time. And for many adults, looking after an older family member exists in parallel to taking care of their own children. Although caregiving can be stressful and exhausting at times, it can also be rewarding, and you don't have to do it alone. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to offer support, guidance, and resources whenever you need them, starting with the following tips:

**Take care of yourself first.** When caring for an older loved one, it's a natural inclination to prioritize their needs. Over time, however, it's all too easy to begin neglecting your own. Caregiving is no small task and in order to do it effectively, you must also take care of yourself and remember that your physical health and mental well-being are just as important as theirs. Take breaks and deep breaths, make time for yourself, set small personal goals, and stick to a schedule.

**Cut yourself some slack.** Caregiving can generate a lot of tough emotions. You may feel selfish at times for taking breaks to do something for yourself. Or, you may even find yourself in an emotional cycle of anger, resentment, and frustration, and then guilt for having those feelings. All of this is normal, and doesn't mean you're not a kind, loving person. Try to remember that no one is perfect and that you're doing the best you can.

**Be present to the best of your ability.** One of the most important things you can do for an aging loved one is to provide them with companionship and encourage socialization. Prolonged isolation can be detrimental to mental health and overall well-being. This is especially true for older adults, as they are among the most at risk of being lonely. Your caregiving duties may be temporary in some cases, such as during recovery from a routine surgery or illness, but that doesn't mean you should stop checking on or spending time with your loved one. Do what you can to also encourage them to interact with friends, community groups, and to participate in social activities.

**Focus on what's positive.** While assuming the role of caregiver comes from a place of love for the person and you're likely grateful that you're able to be there for them, there are bound to be less than desirable aspects that will test your limits. Make a point to acknowledge the positive things that your caregiving experience affords you. Express gratitude for the time spent together, the story you hadn't heard before, the meal you made together, or even just the fact that it was a good day and that you had only one small quibble.

**Recognize the signs of caregiver burnout.** Taking care of an aging loved one can sometimes feel like a full-time job. After a while, the responsibility can take a toll on your well-being, especially when added to the demands of your day job and the family you're raising at home. Some signs of caregiver stress and burnout include mental and physical exhaustion, irritability and loss of patience, changes in sleeping and eating habits, increased alcohol or substance use, and withdrawal from friends and usual activities. If you notice these or other physical or behavioral changes, take steps to address them.

**Ask for help.** Being there for someone who needs you can be truly rewarding. It can also be overwhelming and become more than you can handle. What started out as driving mom to an occasional medical appointment and helping out with yardwork gradually turns into weekly grocery shopping and daily check-ins to make sure she took her medication until suddenly you realize that she is almost fully dependent on you. It's okay if you can't do it all on your own, nor should you have to. Educate yourself about care options and don't be afraid to reach out to friends or family members for support.

Remember that your EAP is also here to help. Call any time, day or night, for resources and information, or to speak to a licensed counselor about all of your caregiving concerns. The EAP is a voluntary and confidential employee benefit available to federal employees at no cost.

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