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## Parents Caring for Parents

The crunch of the middle years may be very real to people balancing home, family, and a job. During the period when families are launching children into adulthood, many are also caring for aging parents. For them, the middle years may not be a time of rediscovering or rebuilding a spousal relationship of travel and fun times *Just the two of you.* It may be a period of bringing aging parents into the home with the evenings and weekends devoted to meeting their needs.

Older relatives facing illness, high medical costs, and increasing frailty often find themselves dependent on their grown children. Those children, in turn, find themselves dividing their resources - time, energy, money - between their aging parents and their own growing children.

### Caring for Parents: The Reasons

Why are we opening our doors to these added frustrations and demands? Because that's our choice. Studies show that most adult children feel very close to their elderly parents. Today one in six mid-life couples has an aging parent in their home for some period of time. Family ties are strong. It is love that compels us to care for those who once cared for us. The problem is that all the good intentions and affection in the world can't overcome the myriad of problems associated with the sandwich generation and its burden of care.

Another reason adult children choose to help aging parents is a sense of duty. At some time in middle age, the grown child reaches a greater sense of maturity in the parent/child relationship. He or she sees the parent as an individual with personal needs and takes on the responsibility of his or her care. While the sole motivation of some children may be a sense of duty, most are motivated by love or a combination of affection and obligation.

The family is the primary support for the aged, providing 80 to 90 percent of their care. This includes assisting with household tasks, transportation, and shopping. This is a key to the elderly living independently as opposed to being institutionalized. In fact, researchers have found older people more often enter an institution due to deteriorating health of the caregiver than because of the needs of the aging person.

### Same...Yet Different

Those who are in a caregiving situation often feel isolated or think their family is different. While each household may be unique in some ways, the caregiving situation is not as unusual as you might think. Other caregivers have probably already dealt with the same problems and emotions. There are resources available to make the caregiving task easier.

Caregiving is often a full-time job. Too many caregivers think they are failures if they don't successfully juggle this as well as the usual responsibilities in the home and outside job. Don't make this mistake. It's not realistic to think one person can know or do everything. Take advantage of outside services. Don't be afraid to admit the job may be too difficult or unpleasant. Allow yourself a needed break from the continual care.

Make a list of the care-giving tasks that are required.

1. What ones can you do?
2. Which ones can be completed by other family members or friends?
3. Are there needs that can be met by utilizing services in the community?
4. What resources are available to you?

Also enlist the support of your family and friends: most are willing to help. Let them. Don't reject their offers of assistance because you think your parent is your concern. Just as important, don't be afraid to ask for their help. In fact, interaction with others may be beneficial to your parent. It may reduce their feeling of dependence or isolation.

## **Resources**

Many communities have a local Division of Aging that may provide assistance with homemaking, outside chores, or transportation. It may be the site for meals provided by elderly nutrition services or Meals on Wheels. In some counties, the Division of Aging provides assistance filling out Medicare and insurance forms as well as budgeting information. The county Cooperative Extension System is also a source for information on budgeting, credit, and more. The local health department may provide home health care. You may discover area support groups for people who care for aging parents. The American Association of Retired Persons is a good resource for educational materials. Other national organizations that may have information or help specific to your needs include:

American Cancer Society  
American Heart Association  
American Diabetes Association  
Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association  
National Association for Home Care

Check the Yellow Pages of your phone book for information on how to contact these and similar organizations or call the Delaware HelpLine, 1-800-464-4357.

While caring for an aging person in your home may be both physically and emotionally stressful, it may also open up a world of warm and loving discoveries about your family. This multi-generational relationship can enrich the lives of everyone involved