

Caregivers Need Family Support

A caregiver is the person or persons who provide the physical, psychological, financial or other forms of assistance provided to someone who requires help. Caregiving can evolve, over a long period of time, or suddenly, in the case of an illness or accident. Caregiving can mean having the dependant person live with you, near you, or hundreds of miles away. Whether providing around-the-clock direct care or coordinating others who are providing direct care the caregiver is responsible to some degree for another person's well-being. However, no matter how loving the relationship, caregiving almost always involves some personal sacrifice and stress.

Families often have unrealistic expectations of the designated primary caregiver. They may expect the caregiver to juggle many hours of mental, emotional, physical and financial stress without complaining or expecting help from others. This is often because of poor communication or lack of understanding of the amount of care involved.

One way to help balance the load is to hold a family conference to make sure that all family members are involved in planning for continued care of the dependant person. Ideally, such a meeting should be held before a time of crisis occurs, so that a plan can be in place. It should be a part of planning for long-term care whether you are planning for your own future care or for someone who currently needs assistance. In this way, family members can all have input into the plans before illness or an accident places additional stress on relationships. A family conference should give everyone an opportunity to discuss their concerns, identify potential problems and solutions, and form a plan for long-term care.

Use the family meeting to decide tasks that need to be done and seek volunteers to carry out those tasks. In this way, one person is less likely to end up trying to do everything alone.

Conflict can sometimes arise between family members who live near the older person and those who live at a distance. If you only see your relative a few days out of

the year, you may not understand the total situation. Here are a few tips for family members who live at a distance:

- Telephone regularly to find out how you can help from afar such as paying bills or doing online research to find services.
- Offer to come and spend a few days to provide some respite for the caregiver.
- Pay for housekeeping services or meals to help reduce work for the caregiver.
- Be a listening ear. Listen without judging when the caregiver needs someone to talk to or share difficult feelings.
- If disagreements arise, consider a non-family member to facilitate discussion. This might be a counselor, caregiver advisor or clergy member.
- Express your appreciation to the caregiver and service providers.

When you do come to visit or to provide some respite, here are some hints:

- Have realistic expectations. Remember you are not there every day and may not be aware of the entire situation.
- Avoid upsetting the routine – don't come in and make a lot of changes and then go home.
- Remember that the care-receiver may be on "best behavior" when you visit. Avoid statements such as "Mom doesn't seem that bad to me!"
- Be prepared to stay longer if the situation changes.

Families need to remember to keep communications open, allowing all involved to have a part in the decision making process. Those who are not serving as the primary caregiver need to be aware that caregiving can be a very stressful task and do as much as they can to help. And always remember to express your appreciation to all who are working to provide care.