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8 Rules for New Caregivers

Feeling overwhelmed? Start with these basic tips.



1. Start with a candid conversation. Talk with your parents about how you will be helping them to meet their needs. Unless they are severely incapacitated, they should continue to make their own decisions and remain a central part of all discussions about their care. Encourage them to articulate their concerns: Most likely, your parents are worried about becoming a burden and losing control of their lives. Have an open conversation about what role your parents want you to play. Establish limits so they don't form unrealistic expectations.

2. Set your priorities. Make a list of what needs to get done and how you plan to do it. An organized approach puts you in control, reduces stress and ensures that your parents get the assistance they need. Be sure to create backup plans, and ask others to serve as reinforcements if necessary. Write down your plans and schedules, and give a copy to all involved family members. Consider using an [online scheduling tool](#) such as Lotsa Helping Hands to organize and keep track of who's

doing what, when.

3. Build a support network. In most families, one person assumes the role of primary caregiver. But that doesn't let others off the hook. Enlist the help of your siblings, of course, but also consider that cousins, nieces and nephews may be eager to help. Don't forget to include your friends, distant relatives, neighbors and acquaintances, such as members of your parents' civic or religious groups. Not all of these folks will volunteer to help, but many will get involved if you ask. Some, in fact, may feel hurt or left out if you don't seek their assistance.

4. Don't be afraid to delegate. Ask a friend to pick up groceries or get books from the library, a neighbor's child to adopt your parent as a grandparent, or a local teenager to help with yard work for a manageable fee. Investigate whether a civic group can provide free home repair or transportation services. Ask the newspaper carrier, a barber or an apartment superintendent to keep an eye out for your parents and to call you if anything seems wrong.

5. Offer alternatives. With family members, don't accept excuses for not helping without offering alternatives. A sibling who lives far away, for example, can help with paying bills, contacting doctors' offices or seeking support from local agencies. Siblings who have young children can cook meals or bring kids along for visits and outings.

6. Hold family meetings. Schedule them regularly, and bring in distant family by phone. Choose a neutral party to moderate if necessary. Draw up a clear agenda for each meeting, and agree on rules of conduct — for instance, don't interrupt, stick to time limits, avoid argument and focus the discussion on how to care for your parents. If meetings tend to be contentious, consider hiring a geriatric care manager to run the meeting.

7. Involve your children. When you have parents and children who need your time and attention, you may feel pulled from both sides. Be honest with your children about the situation, and listen to their concerns. Encourage their questions, and answer them thoroughly. Carve out time for fun activities, and request your children's help. Teenagers can drive Grandma to the store, and even a toddler can make her feel loved.

8. Talk to your spouse. Have a discussion with your partner about your caregiving responsibilities. What role do you expect him or her to play? Suggest specific ways your spouse can help, and show appreciation for his or her efforts. Recognize that your responsibilities affect your spouse, and encourage him or her to talk about any frustrations. Your relationship is a priority — keep it that way.

Your To-Do List

Determine housing options and preferences: With your parents, discuss whether they want to continue to care for their home or whether they have considered living elsewhere. Depending on their health and well-being, they can either stay in their home with some changes and additional help or consider other options such as an assisted living residence or a continuing care retirement community.

Research helpful services: Consider home care, adult day services, meal delivery and help with everyday activities such as preparing meals and doing laundry.

Learn medical history: Ask your parents about any medical conditions or health problems and get a list of their doctors and medications. If your parents are unclear about the details, ask if you can go with them on their next visit to the doctor.

Assemble contact list: Gather names and contact information for those in your parents' personal support system. This should include close relatives and friends, neighbors, friends from their place of worship, clergy, housing managers or apartment front-desk staff, and even the local pharmacist.

Create a financial profile: While this information may be difficult to obtain, it is critical to have. Make a list of income sources such as Social Security and pensions, monthly and yearly income and expenses, bank accounts and investments, and a statement of net worth.

Review legal needs: Work with your parents to determine what relevant legal documents they have or want to have (wills, advance directives such as living wills, health care proxy forms, trusts and powers of attorney). Locate important documents, including their birth certificates, deed to home and insurance policies, and find out if they are up to date and express their current wishes.

Make a list of important accounts: Include Social Security numbers, bank accounts, credit cards, health and life insurance policies, and driver's licenses.

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