

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

You and Your Aging Parents: Understanding Different Stages of Elder Care

Aging is a gradual process and care needs change gradually over time. An awareness of the stage your aging relative is in now, and the stages that may lie ahead can help both you, as caregiver, and your elder family member successfully plan for upcoming needs.

The First Elder Care Stage: Some Assistance May be Needed

You may find it difficult to accept that an elder loved one is beginning to need assistance. This realization can signal a change in the roles you play in each other’s lives, and this can be a difficult adjustment.

You may instinctively try to ignore the signs that changes are taking place. However, it's important to recognize when some assistance is needed. This will help you to find the right solutions and will ultimately reduce stress for everyone.

Aging brings natural physical changes. Their onset can be very gradual and may include:

- Increasing fatigue
- Aching joints
- Reduced vision
- Hearing loss
- Memory loss
- Sleep pattern changes
- Greater susceptibility to illness

Signs that help may be needed. Watch for a change in housekeeping or personal standards. Older people won't usually drop lifetime habits unless they have real reason to do so. Mail may pile up or there may not be enough food in the house.

How you can help. Your elder relative's need for assistance may be minimal at this point. Older adults are also protective of their independence and your relative may appear to resent your 'interference'.

- Be supportive but respect your relative's right to make his or her own decisions.
- Encourage regular vision and hearing tests and check that any prescribed eyeglasses or hearing aids are in good condition.
- Discuss the help that is needed and review how much you and your family can do. Be honest about the limits.
- Share information with your elder relative about possible minimal assistance options. These may include:
    - An outside cleaning agency
    - Help with gardening or odd jobs
    - Assistance clearing snow or ice
    - Delivery services for food and drug store items

    - Telephone bill-paying options

- Check the home for safety and discuss potential hazards with the elder person. Ensure that lighting is adequate and that traffic areas are kept clear of cables, wires and loose rugs. Remember to check exterior lighting and make sure entrances and pathways are free from hazards.

How you can plan for the future. Although it may be difficult at first, it's important to open a discussion with your elder relative about future needs and options. This will ultimately lead to greater peace-of-mind for everyone.

- Begin to talk about future living arrangements. Ask if your relative has ideas in mind.
- Discuss the future financial picture. Does the older person have savings or investments? Has she or he designated power of attorney?
- Discuss the outside support options that may be available if needs increase.
- Check that wills are up to date and suggest a living will so their medical care wishes are respected in the event they are incapacitated.
- Make sure you know where all important papers are located.

Stage Two: There is an Important Need for Assistance

This stage may come as the result of gradual decline or may be precipitated by sudden illness or accident. The causes can be physical or cognitive.

It can be a stressful period for all concerned, and particularly for the primary caregiver.

Faced with increasing responsibilities, you may wonder how you are going to cope and worry about your older relative's well-being.

This is the time to take advantage of all the help that is available. With the best will in the world, you can't possibly do everything yourself.

How you can help. It’s important that you have all the facts at hand at this stage. Talk with your elder relative's healthcare providers to gain a clear understanding of both current and potential future needs.

- Talk with your elder relative about the new needs. Be supportive and positive and stress that life doesn't have to come to a stop.
- Discuss the support you can realistically provide. Be honest about limits.
- Share information about outside support services.
- Review living arrangement options and financial consequences.
- Meet with other family members to discuss needs and determine how much assistance they are able or willing to provide.
- Continue to respect the older person's right to make his or her own decisions, providing that their choices don't involve health or safety risks.

Stage two living arrangements. As you help your older relative make informed decisions about where and how he or she will live, remember that current needs may increase and accommodation options may have to change accordingly. Depending on the choices made, this may mean that Stage Two living arrangements end up being short-term.

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Independent living. With the help of outside support services, your older relative may be able to continue living in his or her own home. Try to arrange an in-home assessment by a qualified healthcare provider who can suggest assistive devices or home alterations that could aid mobility and increase safety.

For more information and useful tips on considering having an elderly relative move in, or how to make that transition a successful one, search for those terms in this online library.

Moving into a retirement residence. As independent living becomes increasingly difficult, many older people decide to move into a retirement residence. Depending on the type of residence selected, this option can mean meeting current needs as well as future needs for increased services. Retirement residences vary tremendously in size, style, services, recreational options, locations and, of course, price. For more on retirement residences, search related terms in this online library.

Stage Three: Extended Care Becomes Necessary

When physical conditions or cognitive problems like dementia become severe, extended medical or personal care may become essential. Unless you or your elder relative has the extensive financial resources required for one-on-one 24-hour care, this stage will likely mean a move into a residential or long-term care facility of some kind.

Although usually inevitable, you may feel conflicted about your elder relative's move into residential care and may feel you are letting him or her down. Try to accept that the move is necessary and you are doing the right thing. Remember that guilt, anger and frustration are all natural responses to a situation that you didn't create. Try to put your energy into selecting the right type of facility and into easing the transition for your parent.

Stage three living arrangements. Your parent's healthcare providers may make recommendations at this stage, based upon medical or personal care needs. Try to visit several facilities and, if possible, involve other family members or family friends in the selection process.

Depending on your location, residential options may include extended care retirement homes, long-term care facilities or a chronic care hospital.

Though the stages of aging can bring some difficult moments for everyone involved, understanding what you and your elderly relative are experiencing, and some of what may lie ahead, can be a big help in handling the changes with grace. By maintaining a relationship of clear and open communication, and by keeping your own, and your aging relative’s feelings and best interests at heart, you are prepared to deal well with whatever life throws your way.