

I remember when I was young and my mother had reached the age when older relatives and friends were beginning to fail. She remarked, with some sense of foreboding that she expected to be getting more and more experience with loss. Her words rang true to me at the time and she was, of course, correct. Now she's gone and so is my father, but not before we experienced a long period of growing dependency that required energy, sensitivity, creativity and the generation of solutions for problems.

I am not alone in this, of course. Has it begun to happen to you, too? Given the demographics of our society, it's a safe bet that you are, or soon will be caring for an aging and progressively more dependent adult.

People aged 65 and older are the fastest growing segment of our society particularly those 85 and older. Longer lives mean more years of marginal health. Longer periods of marginal health can hasten the depletion of financial resources for those on fixed incomes. Ironically, longer life means an increased number of caregivers who are themselves in their 60s.

We have also seen a dramatic increase in single parent, blended and two career families. The resources of caregivers are therefore spread even thinner than they once were. The "triple pressures" of home/work/parent care are formidable. When you add the fact that geographic mobility leads to caretaking from considerable distances, the difficulties can become complex.

Unfortunately, loss is a key dynamic in the aging process. Looking at how an aging person handled losses earlier in their life is an excellent indicator of how they themselves will handle the process. This might give a sense of how they will deal with their own impending losses.

Older adults experience decline in their physical abilities, activities of daily living and in the social and interpersonal fields. In the physical realm, strength, stamina and musculoskeletal changes occur. General health and resilience lessen, often leading to chronic conditions such as: arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, emphysema, osteoporosis, cataracts and dementia. Sensory acuity, especially hearing and vision diminish.

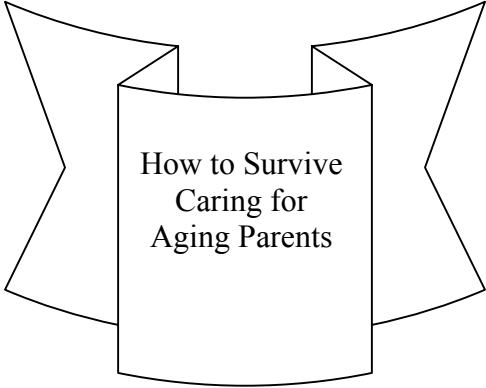
Decreased mobility, a gradual diminishing of independence and lower income can have profound effects on the quality of life of older adults. Fewer friends, feelings of being less useful and productive, coupled with decreased status and power, can be very disheartening to the aged and for those who care for them.



This picture may sound dark and foreboding, but there is cause for optimism. The resources for assisting this large graying segment of our population are expanding at a rapid rate to meet the growing needs. There is an increasing continuum of services designed to meet the needs of the aged and their families. Home based services include: homemakers, health care aides, "Meals on Wheels", friendly visitors, and respite care to name a few. In the community, senior centers, special transportation and adult day care centers provide an array of services. Agencies that serve the elderly include township and village aging services offices, Family Service and Community Mental Health Centers, as well as religious organizations, are providing an expanding array of services to this growing segment of our society. Finally, state and federal departments on aging provide valuable assistance. It is safe to say that facing the complexities of assisting aging loved-ones does not require reinventing the wheel or doing it alone.

Caregiving can take a significant emotional toll on caregivers. Demands on time are great and worry may be constant. One of the first things to go is usually self-care. If the caregiver becomes depleted, his or her capacity to tolerate the behaviors and needs of aging adults understandably diminishes. This can lead to an unfortunate cycle of anger, guilt and overcompensation in caregivers.

Older adults can however, by virtue of lifetimes of experience and historical perspectives, enrich the lives of those around them. They are by no means only a source of stress and strain to others. They deserve to be able to have lives that are rewarding, safe and optimally stimulating. But only by recognizing their unique needs and the special circumstances of each caregiver can solutions to the challenges of aging be found. Again, it isn't necessary to "reinvent the wheel". Others have faced and, at times, mastered these problems. Don't be afraid to ask them for guidance. A wealth of options exists.



How to Survive  
Caring for  
Aging Parents

- Don't do it alone – get support wherever and whenever you can!
- Take care of yourself.
- Take care of your marriage.
- Take care of your family.
- Educate yourself – Don't reinvent the wheel! Use the experts.
- Understand the medical and biological realities of aging -- Don't assume everything is psychological – it may be organic.
- Give advice and assistance – not orders.
- Whenever possible, make decisions together, not unilaterally.
- Whenever possible, opt for greater independence and autonomy for the aging.
- Give yourself permission to feel – rewarded, angry, upset, overwhelmed, tired, happy, frustrated, useful, used, etc.

