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Reversing Roles: Taking Care of Our Parents

by Jim Platt

More than 22 million American households provide some level of support to a family member aged 50 or older—a 300 percent increase over the preceding decade.

The time-consuming tasks, tough decisions, and arrangements for which typical caregivers are responsible can strain and drain the most loving of families, both emotionally and financially. I have just returned from a week of providing respite care for an elderly parent-in-law. I've been through the drill in the past, caring for my own father a few years ago. From my own personal experience, I urge you to consider that if you have not prepared yourself for the demands of such a task, begin strategizing now. It can be a time of confusion and frustration.

Frequently, there is uncertainty as family members attempt to come to some sort of consensus regarding the care of a loved one. When there is “unfinished business” for adult children (feelings of invalidation, sibling rivalry, jealousy, guilt, resentment, etc.), it may be very difficult to maintain the patience needed to properly tend to an elderly parent. This may be especially true when feeling “sandwiched” between the needs of the parent and the needs of your spouse, partner, children, or work.

Those caring for someone with dementia are more likely than other caregivers to have less time for other family members or leisure activities. A recent e-article from *Focus on the Family* suggests that for many families, it seems one person does all the work and may feel tired, stressed, put-upon, and unappreciated (despite the fact that she/he is more than willing to care for her aging loved one). The other family members may feel left out, ignored, or guilty for not doing more. Some extended members prefer to stay out of the picture entirely, except to hear how their elder is doing. Whether you are a recent retiree wishing to ensure that you and your family enjoy peace of mind in your later years, or a grown child hoping to provide care for your parents, you should begin putting together a legal and financial plan that all family members can live with.

According to Mimi Goodrich, a licensed and certified social worker at Avenidas, a California Senior Services Center, one of the most important preparations adult children can make is to create a binder containing all of the information and services that are available in the area for their parents. If an emergency arises, “you don't get as flustered if you have someone to connect with,” Goodrich reasons.

Furthermore, she suggests that if the children live close to the area, they should introduce themselves to their parent's doctor. If they live far away, this can be accomplished through a letter, she suggests. Children should ask their parents if they know what medications they are taking and why they need to take them.

Before you can decide on any plan for your parent's care, you'll need to obtain important financial and legal documents. It is imperative that the family know what insurance/medical coverage exists. If a parent does not have a will or living trust, have an attorney prepare one as soon as possible. This must be executed by a legal professional who is familiar with the specific laws applicable to the state where the loved one resides. Other legal concerns such as power of attorney and medical proxy should be discussed with the elderly loved one and other family members.

Additionally, there are local support groups available that offer information, networking, and mutual support. If you'd like additional details on these groups, or further assistance regarding caring for elderly parents, call 603-646-1165 (or email Faculty.Employee.Assistance.Program@Dartmouth.edu) for an appointment.

There are several excellent guides providing helpful information on this topic.

The Faculty/Employee Assistance Program especially recommends the following books:

- *How to Care for Aging Parents*, by Virginia Morris
- *Caring for Elderly Parents*, by Ruth Whybrow