

Six Things to Remember as You Start to Care for Your Parents

by Jill Eelkema, MSW

Adult children often experience major relationship role-changes as their parents get older. These role changes are at times uncomfortable, unfamiliar and can leave us feeling isolated and unsettled. As we come into the holidays, many of us will spend more time with family and feel the tensions that naturally come when the “closeness factor” changes. Whether you are an adult child or a parent trying to communicate with your kids, here are six suggestions for overcoming some of the obstacles and frustrations we commonly experience during this time.

1. As awkward as it may be, start a conversation with your parents now about how they want help later. Try to keep the communication lines open, even if you are just planting seeds. Adult children often try to help with the same tasks their parents are already working on – and end up stumbling over each other in the process. I’ll never forget one day when a son called to ask about resources for his dad. He told me that his dad would never ask for help on his own. A few hours later—without talking to his son—the dad called: Could I help him figure out what to say to tell his son he needed more help?



Ask parents what they would like to have help with as well as for permission to revisit the conversation if the plan needs to change. If a parent resists this conversation, find out whom they would like to talk with when the need or decision-time arises.

2. Acknowledge hard feelings. Whether it’s a lack of appreciation for your efforts, resentment of perceived obligations or simply being exhausted, the reality is there are some days when we don’t want the role of helping (or of being helped, too)—and then we feel guilty.

Find others who are also going through this stage of life, whether it’s people who are close friends, a support group, or an online community. You will feel better when you know that you’re not the only one having these feelings. It’s important to have people who remind us that we’re not doing anything “wrong” by feeling what we’re feeling.

3. Let yourself mourn. You’re going to mourn the loss of your parents’ independence as much as they are. This can cause a frustrating juxtaposition in role reversals. As parents lose independence, they also hold on to what control they still have. On the flip side, adult children often try to take control of the exact thing a parent doesn’t want them to control of. This whole power-play breaks down connections and deflects from the sadness about the loss—which often families are afraid to feel together.

Schedule a family check-in to talk about the role adjustments everyone is experiencing. Have ongoing check-ins as often as you feel is necessary to keep an open dialogue. Consider hiring a third party to facilitate until you can move forward on your own. Avoid bringing up these conversations over the holidays—they are already emotionally charged and finding a neutral time instead helps everyone come to the table with a clear head.

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Mission

To provide a comprehensive and coordinated system of services designed to promote the independence and dignity of older persons and their families in Muskegon, Oceana, and Ottawa – a mission compelling us to target older persons in greatest need but to advocate for all.



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4. Be compassionate with yourself. What's it like, being you? This new role of caring for someone else, whether you're close by or in another state, creates a new identity. When we take on new roles, they can conflict with how we view ourselves. This is called an identity discrepancy—a feeling of “I've always been the child and now the tasks I'm doing don't fit with that role.” The greater this discrepancy, the more likely someone will feel conflicted which can result in symptoms of depression.

We need to be able to add the additional tasks required and continue pursuing the things we love. When we give up on what we love, we lose even more of our identity and the things we're proud of about ourselves.

5. Laugh when you can. Take a step back as some of what you go through will be sweet or funny. My dad took over my grandma's finances shortly after my grandpa died, but there was a steep learning curve as Grandpa had always given her an allowance to spend. Now she was expected to manage money for the first time in her life. The bank called one day because Grandma had given her bank account number to the Republican Party. According to Grandma, she thought it would be easier for them to just 'take out what they needed' which sent my dad scrambling for a few hours to lock the account. Later when she passed on, we laughed about this sweet memory when we found a Christmas card from the Bush family proudly displayed on her fridge.

Keep a journal of your experiences. Highlight the funny and lighthearted moments by writing with a different color or font. Differentiating those entries will allow you to go back quickly and find the joyful ones.

6. Finally, establish your own personal board of directors. Having a network of support is important to maintaining a healthy outlook as our roles change. Sometimes it's necessary to have a smaller, specific circle of support to help you correct your course when they see that you may be off track.

Make a list of people you can check in with as time goes on. Ideally, these are people who know your situation and will give you honest feedback about how you are managing as your role changes. They should also be people who will tell you if you need to find additional support through counseling, joining a support group, or simply taking more time to do the things you love. Find people you trust, feel connected with and who have walked with you through hard times in the past.

Everyone's path will look different, and this is not for the faint of heart. These steps are meant as suggestions. Give yourself points for authenticity if any of them resonate with you. ❖



Tips to Prevent a Thanksgiving Emergency

Emergency physicians will be working hard over the holidays and the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) has suggestions to make sure that this year's Thanksgiving celebrations are not interrupted by a medical emergency.

"A bit of planning can go a long way toward making sure that Thanksgiving celebrations don't involve a trip to the emergency department," said Christopher S. Kang, MD, FACEP, president of ACEP. "Be careful of potential injuries and troubling symptoms, and do not hesitate to go to the closest emergency department if an emergency occurs."

- Food poisoning. It's no surprise that food-related accidents and illness are a major source of Thanksgiving emergencies. Food poisoning can result from improper handling, cooking or storage of turkey and other items commonly on a Thanksgiving plate. Leftovers are good for three to four days at most, when refrigerated properly. Avoid placing cooked food or fresh produce on a cutting board or other surface that touched raw turkey. Do not wash raw turkey or other meats, the CDC recommends, as that can spread bacteria around the sink and surrounding area.

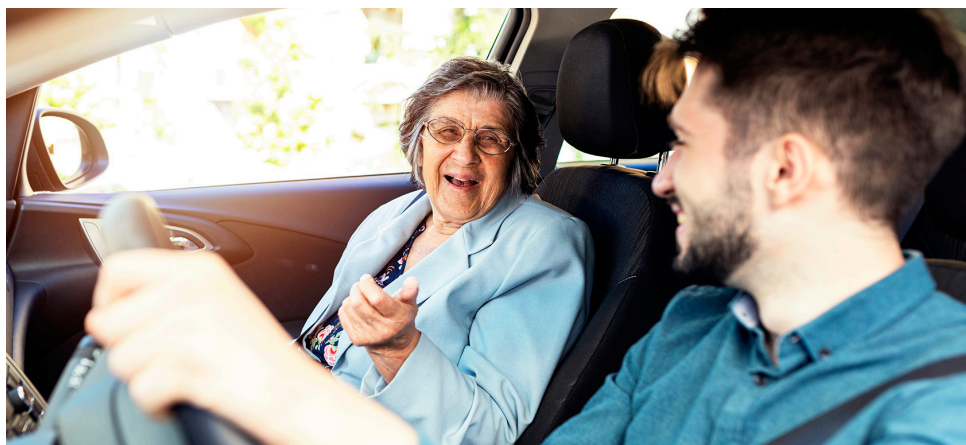
- Kitchen fires and burns. The kitchen is where most Thanksgiving accidents happen, but steps can be taken to avoid severe harm. If a grease fire starts, don't throw water on it because that can cause the flames to spread. If a fire starts in the oven, keep the door closed and turn off the heat. Be extra cautious when deep frying a turkey—make sure the bird is fully thawed and you cook it outside in a cleared, contained space. Anytime flames are spreading out of control, do not hesitate to call 911.

- Knife-related injuries. Preparing a large meal can be stressful; take your time to avoid nicks and cuts from knives or other sharp utensils. Always supervise children in the kitchen to avoid burns or other accidents.

- Car accidents. Thanksgiving is widely known as one of the busiest days on the road. If Thanksgiving plans include time in the car, make sure to factor in plenty of time for traffic, consider preparing a travel safety kit, and do not drink and drive.

"The winter months are busy in the nation's emergency departments," said Dr. Kang. "Still, emergency physicians are always ready to care for you during any emergency, especially during the holidays." ❖

The American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) is the national medical society representing emergency medicine.



November's Website

www.seniorresources.trualta.com

Quotes

"No one has ever become poor by giving."
— Anne Frank

"Gratitude can transform common days into thanksgivings, turn routine jobs into joy, and change ordinary opportunities into blessings."
— William Arthur Ward

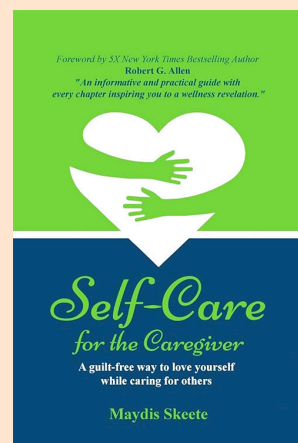
"If you are thankful, what do you do? You share."
— W. Clement Stone

This Month's Book

Self-Care for the Caregiver

by Maydis Skeete

The book provides insight and practical information that will guide a reader to greater self-awareness and wellness concepts.



Loneliness

A new study co-authored by Patrick Hill, an associate professor of psychological and brain sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, offers an important message for our times: A sense of purpose in life—whether it's a high-minded quest to make a difference or a simple hobby with personal meaning—can offer potent protection against loneliness.



“Loneliness is known to be one of the biggest psychological predictors for health problems, cognitive decline and early mortality,” Hill said. “Studies show that it can be as harmful for health as smoking or having a poor diet.”

The new study, based on surveys of more than 2,300 adults in Switzerland, found that feelings of loneliness were less common in people who reported a purposeful life, regardless of their age. It was co-authored by Mathias Allemand of the University of Zurich in Switzerland and Gabriel Olaru of Tilburg University in the Netherlands.

Respondents were asked to score their feelings on a lack of companionship, isolation from other people and a sense of being “left out or passed over” during a four-week period. Participants also filled out the six-item Life Engagement Test, which asked them to rate statements such as “there is not enough purpose in my life” and “I value my activities a lot.”

“A sense of purpose is this general perception that you have something leading and directing you from one

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Multiple Roles: Handling the Guilt

by Helen Hunter, ACSW, LSW

There are many stresses and strains in the relationship between adult children and their aging parents, but one of the greatest of these stresses is the daily responsibility of caregiving. Providing hands-on care, food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and companionship, as well as serving as financial manager and counsel has become commonplace for many adult children.

Most also have several other responsibilities as well: to their spouses or significant other and to their own children, to their place of employment, to their social or church affiliated groups and to their friends. Individuals in this situation are seen as the “juggler,” trying to give equal time and consideration to all who want their time and attention, with little time and consideration left for their own health and welfare. As you can guess, this is not possible to do on a sustained basis before something starts to erode. In most cases, this “something” is the caregiver’s patience and own ability to cope with daily life.

Is it any wonder that people in this “Sandwich Generation” cry out “What’s left for me?” and “How can I satisfy everybody?” The answer is - YOU CAN’T! Superman and Superwoman only live in the comics!

There are many feelings and emotions that stem from this constant stress and strain of serving as the main caregiver. These include frustration, anger, resentment, inadequacy, and guilt. Why are adult children full of these feelings, particularly guilt? They often ask the following questions:

- What else can I do to keep Mom or Dad comfortable?
- Am I doing the right thing - have I explored all the options available?
- They took care of me, why can't I take care of them now when they need me the most?
- Am I weak/incompetent/selfish?
- If I don't devote all my time and energy to Mom or Dad, will I be a bad “child”?

Adult children who feel guilt manifest this feeling by being complaining, offensive or accusatory, overprotective and either visit too often, or not often enough. They often also feel that unless they can return total care to their aging parent, they are not doing enough. This is especially true if there is only one adult child who has the full burden placed on them, or the one of the “bunch,” most often a daughter or the child who lives the closest geographically to the parent, who assumes the burden of care.

What can you do, then, to relieve the guilt that arises when you have all this demand on your time? When you realize that things are reaching a breaking point, arrange for a family meeting, which includes your aging parents, any siblings, your spouse or significant other and your children. You may want a professional involved to facilitate. Letting everyone know your feelings and that you are not able to juggle all the responsibilities anymore may help others to begin to share the load.

It is important here to recognize that there are many instances where the main

caregiver refuses to acknowledge that they can't handle the load— they are too caught up in the daily grind that they don't recognize the warning signals (extreme fatigue, lack of rest, irritability, frustration over lack of time, among others). A professional, outside perspective in this case would be beneficial to objectively point out the potential dangers of trying to do everything for everyone without a break.

Another tip is to negotiate from the start just exactly what the roles will be in terms of providing care for an older relative. Ask for and involve outside agency help in order to get occasional respite. If your parents are resistant in accepting outside help, demanding that you do the job, be FIRM in expressing that you have to look out for your own needs. If you don't, you will eventually wear yourself down to the point where you are no longer effective as the main caregiver. You should not feel guilt in insisting that you take time out for yourself. Remember to follow through on your plan for getting respite relief—you deserve it! Also remember that the help you receive is competent and can handle emergency situations if they arise.

With older people living longer, many adult children are faced with the prospect of being a caregiver for a significant number of years. It is important for adult children to recognize that, in many cases, they will never satisfy or completely fulfill their obligations to their parents, no matter how hard they try. Many try to seek parental approval by giving up all their other needs and responsibilities to care for that parent before that parent dies.

For many, there are unresolved issues between the two generations that adult children feel can be cured by becoming the main caregiver, to make up for the past. These unresolved issues will, eventually, get in the way of the adequate provision of care on a long-term basis. Recognize that fact, with the help of a professional or through a support group, and come to terms with this issue with your parents.

Letting others provide care for an older relative without feeling guilty can be a starting point in the new relationship between the two of you and can be the saving grace in keeping your own life in balance. ❖



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day to the next,” Hill said. “It can be something like gardening, supporting your family or achieving success at work.”

Many of the activities that can provide a sense of purpose—joining a club, volunteering at a school, playing in a sports league—involve interaction with others, which is one reason why a purpose-filled life tends to be less lonely. In the study, people who said they received or provided social support were especially likely to report feelings of purpose.

But Hill noted that there's more to fighting loneliness than simply being around others. “We've all had time in our lives when we've felt lonely even though we weren't actually alone.”

There's something about having a sense of purpose that seems to fight loneliness regardless of how many other people are involved, he said.

The study found a slight uptick in reports of loneliness for people in their 70s and beyond, an age when a sense of purpose can be especially important.

“We're trying to dispel the myth from previous generations that this is simply a time for retiring and resting,” Hill said. “There are no downsides to finding something meaningful later in life.”

Still, it's important to keep in mind that a quest for purpose can be somewhat self-defeating if taken too seriously. “Feeling like you need to save the world can lead to existential dread and distress,” Hill said.

When it comes to purpose and meaning, even small things can matter. “It's OK if someone else thinks that your purpose is trivial, as long as it's meaningful to you.” ❖

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10 Steps for Healthy Aging

Source: Alzheimer's Foundation of America (AFA)

AFA offers the following 10 steps for healthy aging:

- **Eat Well** - Adopt a low-fat diet high on fruits and veggies, like strawberries, blueberries, and broccoli. Take daily vitamins. Limit intake of red meats, fried and processed foods, salt, and sugar. In general, foods that are "heart healthy" are also "brain healthy."
- **Stay Active** - Physical activity increases blood flow to the brain and can also help improve mood and overall wellbeing. Brisk walking benefits brain health, while aerobics can boost your heart rate, and weight training builds strength and flexibility.



- **Learn New Things** - Challenge your brain by starting a new hobby like playing tennis, learning to speak a foreign language, trying a cooking class, or something you have not done before. Even something as simple as brushing your teeth with your non-dominant hand stimulates the brain by forcing it to think outside of its normal routine.
- **Get Enough Sleep** - Getting a consistent sleep every night is key; at least seven to nine hours is ideal. Having a good sleep environment is also helpful. Insomnia or sleep

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Enjoying Special Occasions

by Jennifer Kay, L.C.S.W.

Holidays and special occasions can bring out the best and the worst in us. The prospect of wonderful, happy times abounds, filling us with somewhat unrealistic hopes for our relationships. We are often disappointed by how these special occasions turn out. Add to the normal tensions of holidays, the image of someone you love being ill or incapacitated, and you have the makings of very difficult times. Many times, we wish we could just disappear until the holidays are over.

Caregivers may have unusually high expectations during holidays and special occasions. Knowing that this might be a last birthday, anniversary, Thanksgiving, Hanukah etc., caregivers may feel enormous pressure to make this time especially significant. The caregiving family faces the normal tensions families experience in the holiday season, but their resources are usually depleted, energy levels are low and free time is limited.

Some thought and careful planning can make these times easier. First and foremost, we need to try and think about what we really want to happen. Are you looking forward to having a quiet day? Is it important to have anyone with you? If you are a caregiver, you must ask yourself, "What am I up to doing?" Honor your answer by not doing more than you feel you are comfortable doing.

If you choose to have company at these times, make it as easy as possible. Don't assume all the responsibility. Ask your loved one what he feels up to. Most people usually like to have those they love and feel comfortable around them. Limit these occasions to family members and a few close friends.

Encourage honest communication between the entire family including close friends. Although your loved one may not seem to know exactly what is going on, try to remember that most care recipients have a real sense about themselves,

their illness and what is going on in their world. Don't allow the person's illness to replace their identity.

Families can share their sadness and disappointments by openly communicating about them. And, while you do not need to force cheerfulness, don't forget that humor makes many of the difficulties of life easier to bear. Keeping your level of expectations realistic will make the day go more smoothly for you, your loved one, extended family and friends. Remember that whatever



you choose to do this year does not need to be the same as the past or the same in the future. If sandwiches on paper plates served in the bedroom are all that is possible, don't try to cook a turkey dinner.

The best advice for caregivers is to be realistic. Expect the normal tensions of family togetherness. Let others know how they can make the holidays easier for you. Don't overdo it. Recognize that you may be physically and emotionally depleted. Try to read, exercise, eat well and get some time alone. Try to stay in the here and now; anticipation is always worse than the actual event. We cannot predict what tomorrow will bring for anyone, so enjoy this day without needing it to be perfect. Let yourself dispense with the 'institutional' nature of the holidays and look for ways to make the day meaningful for yourself and for your loved ones. ❖

apnea can have serious physical effects and negatively affect memory and thinking.

- **Mind Your Meds** - Medication can affect everyone differently, especially as you age. When getting a new medication or something you have not taken in a while (whether over the counter or prescription), talk to your doctor or local pharmacist.

- **Stop Smoking and Limit Alcohol** - Smoking can increase the risk of other serious illnesses, while too much alcohol can impair judgment and cause accidents, including falls, broken bones, and car crashes.

- **Stay Connected** - Social interaction and maintaining an active social life are very important for brain health, cognitive stimulation, and mood. Invite friends and family over for a meal, board games, or just to hang out. Engaging in your community and participating in group activities is also beneficial.

- **Know Your Blood Pressure** - Blood pressure can impact your cognitive functioning. Visit your physician regularly to check your blood pressure and make sure it is in the normal range.

- **See Your Doctor** - Maintain checkups. Health screenings are key to managing chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity, all of which can impact brain health. Speak with your physician about any concerns or questions you have about your health.

- **Get a Memory Screening** - Our brains need regular checkups; just as other parts of our bodies do. Memory screenings are quick, noninvasive exams for our brains. ❖

SPOT A STROKE

LEARN THE WARNING SIGNS AND ACT FAST

B E F A S T

BALANCE

LOSS OF BALANCE,
HEADACHE
OR DIZZINESS

EYES

BLURRED VISION

FACE

ONE SIDE OF THE
FACE IS DROOPING

ARMS

ARM OR LEG
WEAKNESS

SPEECH

SPEECH DIFFICULTY

TIME

TIME TO CALL
FOR AMBULANCE
IMMEDIATELY

CALL 911 IMMEDIATELY



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NATIONAL FAMILY
CAREGIVERS MONTH

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