

Parenting Your Parents™

Some Key Eldercare Tips

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Whether working with clients or your own family, the challenges and considerations are the same. Here are six principles: three about our parents/elder clients, and three about us/the children of elder clients.

Respecting Our Parents – Three Principles

1. Slow everything down. Their sense of time and our sense of time are now running at a very different velocity, so move more slowly to accommodate their slowing speed and speak more slowly to accommodate their sluggish ability to comprehend. The more elderly will take twice as long to do something or to think about something or even to express something. But they'll sense and internalize our impatience, reacting with a deep, inner emotion of angst and even anger. So, patience should be our watchword.
2. Treat parents with dignity and respect; their sense of independence is sacred. We can't take them for granted and should never underestimate their need to feel like they are an important and valued part of our busy lives. As long as they are able to make sound and safe decisions, we must respect those decisions. We must not "take over" just because we think they can't do the right things or because we believe we can do things better. Our aging parents want to feel in control and independent, even when they're not. So be very sensitive to their unexpressed frustration that they're now frail and failing. The day they must stop driving will be a turning point in their sense of self-confidence. The move to an assisted living or nursing facility will be another major watershed in their lives. The first fall will signal a defining moment in their decline. And each epic event will demand that we come to terms with their personal fears.
3. Stay close to health care providers and ask lots of questions. Geriatric medicine is growing and maturing at a rapid pace. Our health care system is doing even more to address eldercare. But in reality, the fact is that unless we advocate on behalf of our parents, they may simply get lost in the system. That's why we should ask lots of questions. Why are we taking this course of action? Why can't we try that? How does this medication interact with that one? How can we get physiotherapy for my mother? Ask, ask and ask. And keep records of what is being done with and for your parents.

Respecting Ourselves – Three Principles

1. Plan ahead. It's not a question of our parents becoming frail then ill and eventually dying. It's a question of when and how. So as difficult as it is to initiate these conversations, you must talk to your parents while they are still mentally sound. Talk to them about their own future expectations and needs and desires, right through to end of life decisions. This means putting in place everything from power of attorney to living wills... from knowing how and where they've structured their finances to deciding which sibling will take a lead role in their care. There are so many things to decide and consider. And these decisions are sounder when the family plans ahead. In the state of emotion that accompanies a crisis very few decisions will be good ones.

2. Find day-to-day balance in your own life. As our parents continue in their inevitable decline, recognize that the pressures on you will increase. We'll have to do more for them while still trying to spend time with our spouse and children. And still doing our job at peak performance. And still enjoying some semblance of a social life. And even finding some "me" time. All to say: we need to strive to balance our lives and the demands on it through the years of escalating parent care. Sure, we need to help and support our parents, but not at the cost of our other important relationships, or our own well-being. So you need to plan how to balance your own life. Some enlightened organizations have programs in place. But please consider how you can continue to support your parents without shorting out yourself. If you become ill from the stress of parenting your parents, you won't be good for anything or to anyone.

3. Dump the guilt. There are two kinds of guilt associated with parent care. There is inflicted guilt. That's the guilt dump we get from our parents. It's when they say things like, "if you really cared about us, you'd be here more often". Inflicted guilt is our parents' way of trying to reel us in to help them face their fears and insecurities and needs. It's their way of trying to exercise their fading reigns of control and continue to connect with us. The other kind of guilt is self-induced. It's when we try to second-guess ourselves. It's when we spend a lot of time wondering what we did or didn't do right...what we should or could have done...what we ought to do next and why. So, dump the guilt. If you can look at yourself in a mirror and state with absolute certainty that you're doing the best you can for your parents, then there is no reason to feel guilt.

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