



Planning the Care of Your Aging Parents

If your parents are in their golden years, keep in mind that even gold can lose some of its glow with the inevitable effects of old age — and sooner or later, older loved ones will need assistance.

“It’s never too early to start planning for their future care,” says Virginia Morris, author of “How to Care for Aging Parents.” “Many children of aging parents wait until there’s a crisis, and then they’re left scrambling for mediocre options. Everyone — especially those who live far away from their parents and work full time — can benefit from being prepared and planning far ahead.”

Advance planning means:

- Making sure legal documents have been drawn up, including an up-to-date will, a durable power of attorney, a living will and a health-care proxy.
- Researching the housing options and services available in your parents’ community.
- Discussing with your loved ones how you can help with their future housing, financial and medical-care needs.
- Asking them about growing old — “what are their concerns, their worries, what’s important to them, how can you help them?” says Ms. Morris.

“Don’t parent your parent,” she urges. “The point isn’t to control your parents’ life, but to help them maintain control. Your role is to give them as much autonomy and independence as possible.”

When it’s time to act

One day, all the signs may point to the need for you to actively step in to assist your parents. Telltale signs include:

- Your loved ones start losing weight.
- They stop washing their hair or clothing.
- They drink more alcohol.
- They leave piles of unpaid bills on their desk.
- They let food grow moldy in the refrigerator.
- They start walking unsteadily.

“Trust your instincts,” Ms. Morris says. “Anything that strikes you as ‘Hmmm, is this OK?’ probably isn’t OK.”

Important first steps

Immediately open a line of communication with your parents’ doctors so you can discuss your concerns. And if you live far away, obtain a copy of your parents’ local phone book so you can contact care providers and other resources.

Defining your limits

Many adult children find their first steps into caregiving responsibilities are like walking into quicksand. If you don’t manage your time well or haven’t planned in advance, you can become mired in never-ending obligations, such as daily chores and care, handling legal or financial issues or lining up health-care providers.

“You need to set limits,” says Ms. Morris. “Establishing limits doesn’t mean you don’t love your parents or that you can’t take good care of them. But you’re not going to be any good to them if you’re depressed, angry or sick — you have to take care of yourself.”

To do this, Ms. Morris suggests you:

- Decide what you can reasonably do to help, then stick with that plan. If you decide you’ll visit your mother twice per week, help her manage her finances and investigate local resources, then that’s what you should do. Get help for other needs as they arise.
- Accept help early on — from relatives, friends, neighbors, churches and synagogues, senior centers or home-care agencies. “Set up a whole support network — don’t be the only person doing this,” says Ms. Morris.

- Take care of yourself. Get exercise, get enough sleep, pay attention to your diet and go to support-group meetings for caregivers.

“People often push themselves until they become burnt out and angry at their siblings, and their work starts to suffer. I have seen several times where caregivers ended up in the hospital because they were so wiped out,” says Ms. Morris. “This can be a consuming job — it’s crucial to take care of yourself.”

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Everyday Ways to Activate Your Life



Moderately intense activities (activities during which you feel some exertion but can carry on a conversation comfortably during the activity), such as walking briskly from your parked car to the mall entrance and taking your dog for a quick jog after dinner, won’t help you train for a sport. But they can help you achieve and maintain a healthful weight and improve your overall fitness level.

They can also help reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis, put you in a better mood and improve your balance, coordination and agility.

You have dozens of opportunities each day to increase your activity. Here are 13 ways to help get you started.

Ways to get moving

- Pace when you’re talking on the phone instead of staying put. Though this won’t burn a lot of calories, getting out of your chair throughout the day can help improve your circulation.
- Deliver memos in person instead of having your assistant do it, sending them via interoffice mail or faxing them. Consider these excursions exercise breaks.
- Go window shopping or browsing in your spare time. Shopping is the ultimate easy walking workout. Wear athletic socks and walking shoes.

- Paint your house. You’ll burn an average of 300 calories an hour and get a good upper-body workout.
- Clean your house vigorously. You can burn about 420 calories an hour cleaning floors, vacuuming carpets, washing windows and scrubbing tile.
- Do your own yard work and gardening. Hoeing burns about 360 calories an hour, the same as playing badminton. Cutting your lawn with a push mower burns about 420 calories an hour, on par with playing tennis. Trimming trees burns about 500 calories an hour, equivalent to swimming the crawl.
- Turn lunchtime into an exercise adventure. Don’t eat at the company cafeteria or the same old place. Instead, discover new restaurants within walking distance from your workplace.
- Carry a basket instead of pushing a cart if you’re getting just a few things at the supermarket. Consider it a free weight that keeps getting heavier. But switch the basket from hand to hand periodically to balance the effect on your upper-arm and shoulder muscles.
- Park your car in the garage and leave it there if you’re going anywhere less than a mile away. Taking the hilliest route possible when you’re walking will burn extra calories.
- Sign up for a corporate fitness challenge. Whether you walk or run, you’ll have fun and feel a sense of accomplishment that can spur you to stay in shape long after the race is over.
- Limit sedentary activities during your leisure time. For example, turn off the television several nights a week. Without TV programs to distract you, you’ll move around more than you would otherwise.
- Make exercise a hobby. There’s nothing like getting involved in an activity to take the chore out of exercise. Whether it’s salsa lessons or learning to play golf, you’ll be working out without even knowing it. Dancing can burn as many calories as walking, swimming or riding a bike. Square dancers covered nearly five miles in one evening, one study found.
- Use the stairs. Each flight of stairs you climb burns 10 calories. That doesn’t sound like much, but taking 10 flights a day for a year can result in a 10-pound weight loss.

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