

IT IS NEVER TOO EARLY TO BEGIN PLANNING AHEAD, BUT OVERNIGHT IT CAN BECOME TOO LATE

Studies show that people who anticipate stepping into a parent care role and make some plans, feel less burdened by a parent care emergency than people who've made no plans.

You can take steps now to minimize the frequency and severity of parent care crises and reduce the toll an emergency takes on you, your family, your co-workers and even your parent

1. IDENTIFY TASKS

A few tips to help you get started

You may not need to carry out all tasks yourself and you don't need to complete all tasks before your plan becomes useful. Here are some examples. All may not be relevant to your needs, and you can add others. Don't be discouraged by the length of your list. You may not need to carry out all the tasks yourself and you don't have to complete all tasks before your plan begins to be useful. Make assembling your Parent Care Crisis Kit top priority.

Involve your parents

A respectfully worded letter can introduce the need to make and follow a plan. Encourage parents to discuss long term care and end-of-life wishes with those holding Power of Attorney (POA) and other close family members. In Canada and the USA consider engaging a geriatric care manager (GCM) to be parents' "first call" resource, their healthcare advocate, and your "eyes and ears" (caremanager.org). A skilled mental health professional, like a psychologist or family therapist (if possible someone who specializes in working with older people) may be able to advise you on strategies for effective communication. If your resistant parent gains confidence in a care manager or mental health professional, he/she may be willing to discuss matters that they refuse to discuss with children.

Get organized

For example, use labeled folders or a ring binder with tabbed dividers and pocket pages, to keep information at your fingertips. As care needs evolve, your information needs will change. So set up a flexible system. Obtain a copy of your parents' local phone directory. It can be easier to locate a phone number the old-fashioned way.

Parent Care Crisis Kit

Contact information:

- Your parent's geriatric care manager (if any)
- Primary care physician
- Hospital and emergency room where parents receive care
- Family members; close friends and neighbors; clergy; etc.

For email or FAX to hospital in case of emergency:

- List of all prescription and non-prescription medications and supplements
- Medical history summary including conditions, diseases, surgeries, procedures
- Medical devices, e.g. pacemaker, hip replacement, etc.
- Document(s) giving you authority to 1) talk with healthcare professionals about your parent's condition, 2) make healthcare or end-of-life decisions on behalf of a parent if he/she is unable to do so. What documents or advance arrangements, if any, are required in the country where your parents live, e.g. Power of Attorney/Health Care Proxy, HIPAA (USA) confidentiality documents?

Before talking with parents about long term care, take time to educate yourself

Control the urge to jump right into this potentially challenging conversation. Get started on some of the other tasks.

Take some time to prepare by reading David Solie's fine book on planning ahead titled, *How to Say it to Seniors*. If the dynamics of your family system warrants it, consider consulting with a mental health professional for guidance.

Schedule periodic visits with your parents

Learn about signs to watch for that can signal decline in physical or cognitive capability. During visits you and your siblings can see what is really going on and can help you parents arrange for adjustments to their home (like grab bars or handrails) and/or arrange for additional help if necessary.

Be accessible to those who may need to reach you

Ensure that parents, GCM, primary care physician, neighbors, and close relatives can reach you at all times.

Establish a local support network

Let family, friends and neighbors near your parent know of your concern. Ask them to alert you if they notice any sign of trouble. Ask if you can call on them to help in an emergency. Your parents' primary care physician, geriatric care manager (GCM), attorney, financial advisor(s), and clergy can become important members of this network.

Personal contacts

Collect names and contact information including email and voice-over-internet addresses for the following: family, friends and neighbors who live near your parent or attend their place of worship and close family and friends at a distance.

Healthcare (Medical/Dental/Other)

Assemble contact information for your parent's healthcare professionals and compile healthcare information.

Assemble contact information for primary care physician, specialist physicians, dentist, alternative healthcare providers, including condition being treated by each. Make a list of all medications of your parent takes including prescriptions, over-the-counter, and supplements: strength, instructions for taking each drug, reason for taking the drug, and prescribing physician (or self-medication). Draft, or obtain from their primary care physician, a summary of your parent's medical history including existing conditions, i.e. diabetes, heart disease, etc.; surgeries; procedures; and devices, i.e. pacemaker, hip replacement, etc.

Assemble health insurance benefit information and contacts, e.g. government healthcare or insurance, employer or private healthcare insurance, long term care insurance policy if any. In countries with universal government sponsored healthcare, determine what long term care benefits are available and the process for qualifying to receive such benefits. Determine the jurisdiction responsible for handling healthcare in the city or town where your parents live.

"Vial of Life" (USA) speaks for elders when they cannot speak for themselves. Emergency medical personnel, trained to look for the Vial of Life, use information it contains during the first few minutes of a critical illness or accident in an elder's home. Download the blank form and instructions free (vialoflife.com) or inquire at your parents' local fire station.

Get acquainted with parent's primary care physician. Accompany your parent during an appointment. At another time, with your parent's permission, you may wish to arrange to meet the physician without your parent. In addition to seeing the primary care physician for routine matters, it is common for older people to be treated by several specialists. Too many drugs, drugs that are not effective or no longer necessary, side effects, and adverse conditions caused by drug interactions are all major problems for elderly patients. Ensure that the primary care physician maintains a current list of all your parent's prescriptions and is the central coordination point for information from all of the other healthcare providers which your parent may see.

Aim to have all prescriptions filled at one pharmacy. Periodically, ask the pharmacist to review a current prescription list and identify drugs whose side effect or interaction with other drugs may cause problems.

Finance

In an emergency you may need to handle your parents' financial affairs. In the country where your parents live, what advance arrangements are required? Parents may wish to add your name to bank accounts, credit cards, and safe deposit box. Collect names and contact information of accountant, broker, fund manager, etc. Get acquainted as appropriate. Compile a list of monthly income sources and other assets and locations: bank accounts, CDs, annuities, life insurance, etc.

Legal

Collect names, roles, and contact information for all legal counsel. Get acquainted as appropriate. Are wills, POAs for finance and healthcare and living will/directive to physicians properly executed and *up to date*? Are those named as POAs and executor able and willing to serve? Is there a trust? If so, have assets been transferred? Is it up to date relative to current tax law? Are successor trustees able and willing to serve?

End-of-Life

Your parents may be interested in talking about their end-of-life wishes, e.g. funeral/memorial service, obituary, burial, etc.

2. CONSIDER "SKILL SETS"—YOURS AND INDIVIDUALS IN YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS NETWORK

Think about each person's skills, interests, communication style, comfort level, availability and reliability. Review your task list and match individuals with tasks and roles. If you engage a geriatric care manager, consider delegating certain tasks to this person.

3. DELEGATE—CLARIFY ROLES AND OBTAIN AGREEMENT TO FULFILL TASKS

Communicate as appropriate with each person about their willingness to handle a particular task(s). When you reach an agreement (if appropriate including a timetable for fulfilling task) put it in writing, keep a copy for your records, and give a copy to the person agreeing to fulfill a particular task. If appropriate, schedule appointments with physicians, attorney, fund manager, accountant or other professional at least a month in advance and confirm close to date.

4. DEVELOP A COMMUNICATION PLAN

Designate *one* person to be the family's sole contact with physicians, nurses and medical facilities during a crisis. This person can provide daily updates to family members by conference call or email, as appropriate. As the urgency resolves, and with agreement of family members, reduce the frequency to weekly or monthly. In the case of a lengthy illness, it may be appropriate to provide more general updates to a wider circle of friends and family. Another family member, other than the sole healthcare contact, can assume this responsibility.

5. ESTABLISH AND FOLLOW A TIMETABLE FOR REVIEWING AND REVISING YOUR STRATEGY

With advancing age or chronic illness your parent's care needs will change. Change may be either gradual or rapid. Be vigilant and update your strategy in a timely manner. For example:

- As eyesight fails, your parent who needed help only with housekeeping will need help with grocery shopping and medication management. You will need to adjust your support network accordingly.
- A fall, and resulting bone fracture, can precipitate the need for paid assistance and require either a move to an assisted living community or engaging and managing in-home caregivers.
- At some point in your parent's decline, the family may wish to develop an email "distribution list" to share information gleaned from calls and visits with all involved family members.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES TO SUPPORT YOUR PLAN

Glossary of Eldercare Terms and Topics (www.binocvision.com/glossary)

The Binocular Vision website contains a glossary in summary form which can be a useful reference. To download a PDF of the complete 9-page glossary go to www.binocvision.com/Glossary.pdf

Record keeping tools

The Senior Care Organizer by Claudia Rumwell with Marcia Johnson.

For people in the role of long distance caregiver. Includes forms for collecting and organizing specific kinds of information. You provide ring binders, tabbed dividers, pocket pages and copies (as needed) of forms. For information or to order, visit www.seniorcareorganizer.com.

Ready or Not by Julie Edstrom.

Active, independent parents can use the system to organize information and documents. For more information or to order visit www.readyornot.biz.

Books about parent care

How to Care for Aging Parents by Virginia Morris

A good overall reference book addressing a wide variety of topics and issues relevant to eldercare.

My Mother, Your Mother, Embracing "Slow Medicine": The compassionate approach to caring for your aging loved ones by Dennis McCullough, M.D.

"Slow medicine" is a family-centered form of treatment for the elderly that is less invasive and less expensive than standard care.

Books about communicating with older parents

Coping with Your Difficult Older Parent: A guide for stressed-out children by Grace Lebow and Barbara Kane with Irwin Lebow

A common-sense guide from professionals, with more than two decades in the field, on how to smooth communications with a challenging parent. Filled with practical tips for handling contentious behaviors and sample dialogues for some of the most troubling situations.

How to Say It to Seniors: Closing the communication gap with our elders by David Solie

The author, a geriatric psychologist, offers help in removing the typical communication blocks many grown children experience with their elderly parents. By sharing his insights into the later stages of life, he helps grown children understand the unique perspective of seniors, and provides the tools to relate to them.

The Parent Care Conversation: 6 strategies for dealing with the emotional and financial challenges of aging parents by Dan Taylor

Long term care for aging parents is a sensitive, often difficult, but ultimately inevitable issue with which all of us will have to cope sooner or later. The book offers a step-by-step approach that can enable families to develop workable plans of action. By first addressing the emotional aspects of long term care that take into account the parents' feelings and wishes, then integrating the practical and financial components, grown children can use this book to help open the door for a critical exchange of information and honest discussion with aging parents that has long been the major roadblock to successful elder care.

TO DOWNLOAD FROM OUR HOMEPAGE CLICK "Your Parent Care Plan"

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