

“My mother has always cared for me, and now I am caring for her every day. I feel like I am the parent and she is the child.”

Changing Relationships in Caregiving

As family members age and become more dependent, family caregivers may experience many emotions. Some are new, and some are carryovers from past experiences. As you take on the role of caregiver, you may experience changes in your relationship with the care receiver.

Often caregivers find themselves in a role-reversal situation. Now they are caring for aging parents, a spouse, friend, or another relative who once spent many years caring for them.

Changing relationships can cause feelings of fear, guilt, or anger as you care for a dependent adult. These emotions are normal. It is not easy to deal with the emotions of changing relationships, but there are a few things caregivers can do to respond positively.

Tips for Caregivers

- Adjust your perceptions and expectations of the care receiver, realizing that he may no longer be able to respond to you as he once did.

- Express your feelings to someone who will listen and understand. Sharing your emotions can make it easier to deal with changing relationships.
- Acknowledge your fears. You may fear losing the love of the care receiver and, ultimately, the care receiver’s death.
- Realize that it is normal to be angry with the care receiver as well as with yourself. Even people who had positive relationships can still feel angry when their lives are disrupted and they are tired, worried, and pulled in many directions.
- Understand that feeling guilty is a common experience. Guilt may or may not be based on anything you did or did not do. Sometimes the person we care for uses guilt feelings as a way to get more attention or to get you to do as he wishes.

You can sometimes stop this manipulative behavior by providing more help and attention to the care receiver. However, it may be necessary to have a family discussion about this.

Acknowledge each person’s feelings as you talk to the care receiver. Explain that there are limits to what can be done.

Use these ideas to help the care receiver feel better about needing help.

- Encourage the care receiver to provide as much self-care as possible.
- Ask questions and seek opinions from the care receiver to increase feelings of value and self-worth.
- Keep communications open.
- Trust and respect each other.
- Acknowledge and resolve negative feelings.
- Accept the care receiver as he is today, forgiving past mistakes and hard feelings.

Changing relationships can bring out such emotions as fear, anger, or guilt in anyone. This can be especially stressful when the changing relationships are due to dependence or role reversal in a caregiving situation. It is normal to have these feelings as you care for an elderly or disabled person. It is important to acknowledge these feelings and talk about them with someone who will listen—a friend, spiritual leader, or senior service provider. Keep family communication as open and positive as possible.

I can take these steps to accept our changing roles:

For more information, contact:

- Illinois Department on Aging
Senior Helpline: 1-800-252-8966
<http://www.state.il.us/aging>
- National Council on the Aging
1-800-424-9046
www.ncoa.org
- AARP
1-800-424-3410
<https://www.aarp.org>

For more information, read:

Baby Boomer's Guide to Caregiving for Aging Parents by Bart Astor, Macmillan General Reference, 1998.

You and Your Aging Parent- 4th Edition by Barbara Silverstone and Helen Kandel Hyman, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Another Country- Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders by May Pipher, Riverhead Books, 1999.

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Caregiving Relationships: For People Who Care for Adults

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