

HEALTH CARE

Make Smart Choices About Parents' Care

Life is good. Business is on the upswing. Perhaps your daughter is off to college and your son is getting good grades in high school. Maybe you even managed to take a vacation this past summer. Then, you get the phone call. Mom has been hospitalized. Or your sister calls to say Dad has become much more forgetful lately. Suddenly, elder care has edged its way up your to-do list and into your life.

If you find yourself in this situation, you've got company.

- There are over 44 million family caregivers in the U.S. today, according to a 2006 study by the MetLife Mature Market Institute and the National Alliance for Caregiving.

- And 633,549 of them live in Massachusetts, according to the National Family Caregivers Association.

- Two out of three caregivers work outside the home while taking care of a family member.

- Over 6.5 million family members are long distance caregivers, i.e., they are arranging care for someone who lives at a distance of more than an hour away.

The good news is that there are more alternatives available today to help you and your aging parents cope. You don't have to go it alone. And your business skills – planning, organizing, communicating clearly – will stand you in good stead. Here are some first steps to take when you face an elder care situation.

Gather the Facts. Once you get



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over the emotional impact of realizing Mom or Dad has a serious problem with maintaining independence, get organized. Start by assessing the situation. Set up an information folder – paper or electronic – to centralize information such as:

- Information about your parent's health condition,
- Social Security, Medicare, health insurance ID numbers,
- Contact information on medical, legal and financial professionals, and names of friends or neighbors who are in regular contact with the elder.

Has Mom or Dad had a complete physical in the last two years? This needs to be done to assure baseline data.

Be Realistic. With the demands of running a business, many find it difficult to devote the time or energy to personally serve as primary caregiver

for a parent, i.e., the person in the family who takes responsibility for coordinating all aspects of the elder's care.

Your options are to a) do it yourself, b) identify another family member who can take on this role, or c) engage the services of a private geriatric care manager.

A care manager is a professional, usually a social worker or a nurse, who, for a fee, provides specialized assistance to older people and their families with long term care arrangements.

Starting with an in-home assessment, he or she can evaluate the elder's situation, recommend a plan of action, even arrange and monitor services. This latter service is especially helpful in long-distance caregiving situations.

Consider Other Points of View. Because every family is different, every elder care situation is different. Contrary to the popular phrase, you are not "parenting your parent."

Elder care involves one adult caring for another adult. No matter how frail, the elder has the right to make choices about how and where to live and whether to accept help from others – to the extent that the elder is capable of making such decisions.

And it is wise to open up communication with siblings. Understand their points of view. It may not always be possible to reach consensus but open communication is a plus over the long run.

Learn About Resources. When

faced with a decline in health or abilities, most older people prefer to be cared for at home for as long as possible – and so do their family members.

Research shows that remaining at home sweet home can actually enhance healing. Today, through a combination of in-home monitoring, home modifications and quality home care services, many more frail older people can continue living in their own homes.

Assisted living, continuing care retirement communities and other new housing options also provide alternatives to nursing home placement. A care manager can help determine the best options for your older relative's situation.

Good sources of information on the range of elder care help are the toll-free hotline operated by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs, 1-800-AGE-INFO, and, on a national level, the free Elder Care Locator service funded by the U.S. Administration on Aging, 1-800-677-1116 or www.eldercare.gov.

Choose Wisely. Recent scandals related to nanny care are still fresh in many people's minds. With elder care, the risks involved with recruiting individual home care providers go beyond the legal consequences of failing to pay Social Security and

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other benefits.

Because the elder is often frail and vulnerable, it is vitally important to assure the integrity and competence of paid caregivers. It's smart to deal with a homecare agency rather than with individuals.

Be sure to ask:

- Are the agency's caregivers employees?
- Does the agency conduct background checks?

- Does the agency carry worker's compensation and liability insurance?

There are two types of home care organizations:

1) A registry places home care workers who are independent contractors. The family supervises care and pays and supervises the home care worker directly, and

2) A home care agency employs the home care workers, providing them with training, government-mandated benefits and supervision, usually by a registered nurse.

Juggling responsibilities for raising a family, succeeding in your career and caring for an older relative can be stressful. You can, however, reap rewards from the caregiving experience. This is an opportunity to heal relationships and give back to an older person who may have given much to you earlier in life.

By taking an organized approach and choosing elder care advisors and providers wisely, you can find that elusive work/life balance when faced with the challenges of elder care.

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