LIVING WELL

When Your Parent Needs More Help Than You Can Give

How to recognise that care has outgrown one person, share the work and protect both your parent and yourself.

The moment care gets bigger than you

The groceries were manageable. So were the lifts to appointments and the calls about medicine. Then, almost without announcement, helping your parent became the organising principle of your life. You are always listening for the phone, moving one obligation around another and wondering what you have forgotten. You love them. You are also reaching the edge of what one person can do.

That edge is not proof that you have failed. Family caregivers may handle bathing, meals, medicines, housework, transport, appointments, emotional support and financial or health decisions. Some are effectively on call all day while also working or looking after children. These are complex demands, often taken on without training or help. Love does not turn them into a one-person job.

Care can be meaningful and can strengthen your relationship with a parent. It can also be stressful and overwhelming. Both things can be true in the same afternoon. You do not have to deny the closeness to admit the cost, or wait until resentment replaces tenderness before deciding that something needs to change.

The useful question is not whether somebody else has it harder. It is whether the present arrangement is safe and sustainable for the two people living inside it. If your parent's needs keep expanding while your time, knowledge or strength do not, the gap must be filled by more support-not by asking more and more of you.

Your strain is information

Caregiver stress can look like feeling overwhelmed, isolated, worried, sad or easily angered. You may sleep too much or too little, feel tired most of the time, lose interest in things you enjoyed, notice frequent headaches or body aches, or gain or lose a lot of weight. Some people begin smoking or drinking too much. These are not character flaws. They are signs that the arrangement is taking a toll.

Long-term caregiver stress is associated with depression, anxiety, problems with short-term memory or attention, and serious physical health problems. A 2021 systematic review and meta-analysis of 74 studies found a large positive association between caregivers' sense of burden and anxiety symptoms. The more burdensome care felt, the more anxiety tended to appear.

The connection is particularly well documented in dementia care. A 2023 systematic review of 19 studies found that unpaid caregivers of older adults with Alzheimer's disease experienced emotional strain, including greater anxiety, depression and burden and poorer quality of life. Financial pressure and lack of support were among the factors linked with that strain.

You do not need a formal score to take your own distress seriously. But if sadness, anxiety, illness, heavy drinking or another change in your health is becoming a concern, contact a healthcare provider. This is the point at which the problem is no longer only how to organise your parent's care; your own physical or mental health needs attention too.

Love does not turn them into a one-person job.

Safety changes the calculation

Sometimes the clearest sign that more help is needed is not your exhaustion but your parent's safety. Falls in adults aged 65 and older can cause serious injury, reduced mobility, disability, prolonged hospital stays or admission to a nursing home. Removing throw rugs and clutter, improving lighting, and installing bathroom grab bars and handrails on both sides of stairs are among the recommended ways to make a home safer.

Driving may become another pressure point. Older adults can preserve mobility and independence through driving, but the risk of injury in a crash increases with age. Safer conditions, consistent seat-belt use and alternatives such as public transport, a ride service or a lift from someone else may need to become part of the care plan. You do not have to be the only alternative driver.

After a fall or car crash, an older adult should be checked by a healthcare provider for signs of traumatic brain injury (TBI), because those signs can overlap with other medical conditions. Call emergency services or go to an emergency department immediately for worsening headache, repeated vomiting, seizures, slurred speech, unusual behaviour, new confusion, weakness, loss of consciousness, extreme drowsiness or inability to wake.

Safety does not mean stripping your parent of every choice. Guidance for family caregivers recommends focusing on what the person can do and, where appropriate, supporting as much independence as possible while keeping health and safety in view. The aim is not to take over



reflexively. It is to notice which tasks are still manageable and which now require another person, a change to the home or professional judgment.

Help has more than one shape

"Get help" can sound like one enormous decision. It is usually several smaller ones. A friend might collect groceries. A relative might sit with your parent while you run an errand. Community services may offer adult day care, while respite care provides temporary care so that family caregivers can take a break. Paid professionals may provide care at home or in another healthcare setting.

Specific requests work better than a general announcement that you are struggling. Make a list of tasks and let willing helpers choose. Include small jobs as well as demanding ones: shopping, cooking, transport, company, appointment arrangements or a regular check-in. Sharing care does not require handing every decision to somebody else. It means stopping one person from being the entire system.

Support for you matters as well. Local or online caregiver groups can offer practical information and contact with people facing similar pressures. A 2022 network meta-analysis of 85 randomised trials in dementia caregivers found that support groups were the only intervention studied with a statistically significant effect on quality of life. Case management, psychoeducation and multicomponent programmes appeared effective for reducing caregiver burden.

Evidence also shows why no single offer should be treated as a cure-all. A 2024 review of 16 randomised trials involving caregivers of people with advanced cancer found that targeted palliative-care interventions improved depression and quality of life but did not significantly reduce caregiver burden. Emotional support can help while the workload remains. Sometimes the workload itself must be redistributed.

Make the care visible on Monday

Your next step is a written care map. It takes a sheet of paper and a pen. Divide the page into three columns: what your parent needs, who does it now and who else could do it. Include meals, bathing, medicines, housework, shopping, transport, appointments, company, health decisions and financial decisions where they apply.

Do not write "everything" beside your name. Break the work down until another person could understand it. Add the tasks that wake you, interrupt work or prevent you from keeping

appointments of your own. Add any safety concern in the home and any job that requires knowledge or physical help you do not have. The page is not a verdict on your devotion. It is an honest picture of the work.

Then choose one task to move. Ask one named person for one specific form of help, or ask a healthcare provider about relevant training, case management, respite, adult day care or community support. If you are employed and overwhelmed, ask your human resources office what leave or flexible scheduling options apply to you; eligible employees may have unpaid leave available under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

Keep the map and update it as your parent's needs change. A current medical history can also help you advocate and inform other caregivers about important circumstances. By the end of the week, the goal is not a perfect care plan. It is one responsibility no longer resting entirely on you-and a piece of paper that makes the next request easier.

Where this comes from

- Caregiver Health

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/caregiverhealth.html
- Caregivers

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/caregivers.html
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