

Jody Gastfriend, LICSW

VP Senior Care Services

Care.com

Caring Preparing:
Paving the Way for an Unknown Journey

So many of us are caught off guard by the circuitous journey of caring for our aging parents. As our parents enter the challenging stage of old age, with the infirmity and chronic illness it often brings, we are torn between our desire to help and their need for autonomy and control. It was this struggle that haunted Martin after his mother Janet's death. Janet had returned home from the hospital with a visiting nurse and a home health aide. Martin's relief that his fiercely independent mother was willing to accept help was short-lived, when, after several weeks, Janet was no longer eligible for skilled care at home – and she rejected Martin's plea to try assisted living. "My mother was a tough old bird. She lived through the depression, was widowed at an early age, survived two bouts of cancer, and seemed indomitable to me as a child." That invincibility was shattered when Janet returned to the hospital with respiratory failure and died. "So, when my wife's father turned 80 last year, we hired a geriatric care manager as a "go to person." My father-in-law is still playing golf, but he lives a plane ride away and we want to be prepared if he can no longer care for himself. I wish I had done that with my mother".

Martin is not alone. According to a 2009 study by the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, more than 65 million people in the U.S. provide care for a chronically ill, disabled or aging family member or friend. Making effective decisions about the care of a loved one often takes more time than anticipated and requires an understanding of the complicated long term care system. But a proactive approach can yield better options when the time comes and can head off a family crisis.

While an adage of caregiving is to "expect the unexpected", there are steps you can take to prepare more effectively.

- Have conversations early and often. It is important to understand your parents' preferences as they age. Don't make assumptions about what type of care they may or may not accept. Instead, ask.

- Respect your parent’s autonomy. Rather than starting off with an admonition (e.g., “You have to...”), it is better to lead with an empathic statement such as, “I am worried about you because...if you continue to live alone, you may fall and break your hip”.
- Learn about the different types of care and payment options. Many caregivers panic when they realize Medicare won’t pay for long term care in a nursing home and the average price tag is \$80,000 per year.
- Resistance is common. Try to introduce support incrementally. For example, try first introducing a caregiver just once a week to clean up or drive a parent to a doctor’s appointment, so the help feels comfortable and unobtrusive.
- Seek out expert help. The assistance of a social worker, geriatric care manager, financial advisor or elder law attorney can go a long way in guiding you through the legal, financial and emotional challenges of caregiving.
- And remember, take care of yourself first. As simple as it sounds, many caregivers skip this important step and burn themselves out. You cannot care for others if you neglect your own needs. Neglecting oneself is the quickest way to snapping – which leads to guilt – which leads to more neglecting oneself.

Be proactive about caregiving. Set the stage to enjoy the precious time to just be together as your parents age and require help. Someday, you may be comforted to know that as a result of planning ahead, you were better able to provide the best care possible and wisely navigate the caregiving journey.