

Parenting a parent

Once you have a plan, it won't seem so daunting

As you age, so do your parents. Inevitably the day comes when one or both of them need help, and when they do, the circumstances are often sudden and demanding.



By Andrea Cohen

For the most part, you are not prepared for a lot of what happens. Your parents may deny needing help and live so far away that you don't really know how they are doing. Your siblings might disagree about the type of care your parents need, or simply avoid the topic altogether. It's hard enough to navigate the long term care system, and it becomes even harder when you are dealing with the emotions of parenting a parent.

How do you order the chaos and prepare for what will be? There are solutions that work. They require time, energy, and perseverance. The more you prepare, the easier it will be.

What you'll need:

- Information to make informed health decisions.
- A roadmap to help you understand what's next.
- A coordinated "care team" with clear roles that you can contact when it's convenient for you (not just for the care provider).
- The ability to communicate with other family members as often as you like, without having to pick up the phone and call each individually.
- Completely reliable care providers.
- Easy access to information that is stored in one place.

Where to start:

- As you prioritize, ask yourself three questions: What must I do now? What can I do later? Who else can do this?
- Make a list. Break down the overwhelming jobs into doable tasks.
- Get advice. The many sources available include hospital discharge planners, geriatric care managers (especially helpful for long-distance caregivers); your local Council on Aging or Aging Service Access Point; friends with experience; your employer; and a growing number of internet sites.

- Hire help. The caregiving industry is exploding.

The costs. Long-term care is expensive, and the out-of-pocket expense is often underestimated. Payment options are complex. If you don't stay on top of the constantly changing rules, you may find yourself in a stressful financial situation. You can reduce out-of-pocket expenses by planning ahead.

Resources to help. First, talk to the people you know who have been caregivers.

Second, speak with professionals who can offer support, advice, and guidance in a variety of areas, which may include:

- Teaching you the difference between assisted living and independent senior housing – and helping you figure out the most appropriate choice.
- Making your parent's home safer with small modifications.
- Reviewing legal documents.
- Setting up advance directives.
- Helping you start "the conversation" with your parent.
- Identifying strategies to pay for out-of-pocket health care costs.
- Putting together a list of questions to ask the doctor.
- Advising you whether your par-

ent should go home or to a rehab facility following hospitalization.

- Helping you understand what Medicare does and doesn't pay for.

Getting your parents to make a change. It's important to start the conversation early in the game. **When you do:**

- Acknowledge your parent's concerns. Even though you have their best interests at heart, this is about what they want.
- Directly express your own needs and worries, and be clear about what you can and cannot do.
- Ask someone (who is not you) to speak with your parent (doctor, rabbi, friend).
- Collect information about resources, give it to your parent, and then let it go for a while. Be patient. This is a process.

And finally, trust your own judgment. You might be out of your comfort zone, but you know more than you think. Like any caregiver, you should expect at least one false start. There is no straight path or one best solution.

Andrea Cohen is the co-founder and CEO of HouseWorks (house-works.com), a private home care company based in Newton. She currently chairs the Board for the National Family Caregivers Association.

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