

# Caring for an Older Adult

## What Every Caregiver Needs to Know

### Age-Related Changes and Adaptation

To effectively care for an older adult, it is important for the caregiver to have at least a basic knowledge and understanding of losses associated with the aging process, and how he or she, as caregiver, can help the individual successfully adapt to these losses. The following "Principles For Relating To Aging Parents," developed by Gerontology Network, may be helpful in this regard:

1. Your parents have many emotional and physical strengths they have used throughout their lives, and are still using. Relate to them as adults with a variety of strengths, not children who need to be taken care of.
2. There are a variety of normal physical and mental challenges which occur as part of the aging process. For example:

There is a loss of physical flexibility.

Eyes take longer to adjust to differences in lighting.

Some hearing loss often occurs.

Food is digested less efficiently.

3. Older adults face a great number of changes and losses including decreased physical abilities, loss of friends and family, retirement, changed roles in the family, diminished income, moving to another residence, etc. These losses need to be recognized, and time allowed for grieving.
4. A general understanding of the changes related to aging is helpful to both parents and children.
5. Aging successfully involves adapting to the changes and losses related to aging.
6. Unless the older adult wants to change, try to avoid additional unnecessary changes during periods of loss.
7. Often old habits do not change, but become more pronounced.
8. If your parents can no longer live independently, remember there are alternatives to nursing home placement which allow the older adult to remain at home and living as independently as possible. Check out in-home nursing services, chore services (i.e. - light housekeeping and yard work), home delivered meals, etc.
9. Talk with your parents and work together to formulate plans. Do not make decisions for your parents when they can make their own decisions, or at least be involved in the decision making process.
10. Realistically assess what assistance you can provide.
11. Remember, there is no right answer for how to relate to aging parents. You and your parents must find an approach that will work for you.

Gerontology Network has also developed the following suggestions regarding “Adapting To Aging Related Changes”:

### **1. Vision**

Check all areas of the home to make sure lighting is bright, without glare or shadows.

At night, use night lights, flashlight, or regular lighting – avoid walking in the dark.

If uniform lighting is not possible, eliminate possible barriers in the area

Use brighter lighting for reading areas.

Try to delineate edges of stairs, platforms, and counter tops.

Supplement markings on appliances.

### **2. Taste and Smell**

Use seasonings in foods, such as spices and herbs. Avoid extra salt.

Pay attention to the appearance of food – it is more appealing if it looks attractive.

Use safety devices, such as smoke detectors.

Put the date on leftovers stored in the refrigerator

### **3. Hearing**

Speak clearly and distinctly – don’t shout.

Eliminate background noises if possible.

Face the person, don’t sit between the person and the window or other light source.

Telephone amplifiers and hearing aids can be helpful.

### **4. Touch**

Touch older adults – it is a powerful communication too

Use different textures and materials to help older adults negotiate their environment.

Pay attention to temperature – both indoors and out.

### **5. Mobility**

Be sure the home is free of barriers, or dangers such as slippery floors, throw rugs, clutter on the floor.

Maintain some type of exercise program.

Use steps and assistive devices if needed.