

The Role Reversal



A Guide to Navigating the Emotional
Landscape of Caring for Aging Parents



According to the Population Reference Bureau, our population today is older than it's ever been. The median age over the last 40 years has increased significantly, from 30 to 38.9 years old. Here's why that's significant: By the year 2050, the number of Americans over 65 will increase by nearly 50% from 58 million to 92 million.

Whether your parents are well into retirement or still have a ways to go, there's a good chance that over the coming decades, you'll need to provide care for them. Around 41.8 million people provide unpaid care to an aging adult (that's around 17% of the adult population) every year.

Caring for our parents or in-laws is something most of us are honored to do. These are the people who raised us as children, after all. Now we feel an inherent responsibility to help them in their time of need. As willing as you may be to care for your loved one, it's okay to admit that caretaking takes a toll on everyone involved. Not just financially and physically, but emotionally as well.

In this book, we're reviewing the emotional landscape involved with caring for parents and providing practical tips for effectively caring for yourself and your loved ones.

Understanding the Emotional Landscape

As with any challenge in life, sometimes it can be hard to recognize and acknowledge your feelings regarding caregiving. But in reality, you're likely going to feel a range of emotions — and that's okay. You are certainly not alone in this journey, and you are valid in how you process what's going on around you.





The emotional landscape of caregiving varies far and wide, but a few common emotions include:

- **Guilt:** You may feel guilty that you're not doing enough or providing good enough care for your loved ones. You may also feel guilty about spending less time and energy on other aspects of your life, like your kids, job, social life, or personal health.
- **Grief:** Caregiving often brings to light the harsh reality that your parents won't be around forever. Depending on the severity of their illness or impairment, you may be grieving the person they used to be while preparing for life without them.
- **Stress:** Between managing your parents' calendar and finances, helping them stay safe, and assisting in their daily living activities, it's completely understandable if you're feeling stressed about your caregiving responsibilities.
- **Resentment:** Yes, you may feel resentment at times toward your parents, and that's normal as well. You're only human, and you didn't ask to have your life upended by a parent's illness or decline. While you're happy to do it and wouldn't have it any other way, it can still sometimes feel like your freedom or "old life" was taken away from you.
- **Impatience:** Don't think your parents were ever impatient with you as a child? Think again! When it feels like someone else can't grasp even basic concepts or listen to instructions, it's human nature to feel impatient and irritable toward them.

However you're feeling, it's important to acknowledge those thoughts and allow yourself grace. If feelings of anger or irritability persist, it may be time to take a step back and ask for support. You could be sleep-deprived and/or in need of self-care time to relax and refresh.





How Role Reversal Impacts Family Dynamics

It's also important to take into consideration how your parents may be feeling, as caregiving often impacts family dynamics.

Caregiving creates a role reversal, where the child becomes more like a “parent” and the parent becomes the child. For some families, this doesn't cause issues. But for many, especially older or more traditional parents, it can be uncomfortable (or even embarrassing) to experience this role reversal.

As you go about your day-to-day caregiving responsibilities, try to be cognizant of how your parents are feeling about the situation. They may not outright express their discomfort but try to help them feel as comfortable with the arrangement as possible.

Rather than give them instructions, try to ask for their opinion. Or ask for their help doing easy tasks, like peeling an apple, solving a puzzle, or reading to a young child. Giving them a sense of autonomy and purpose is important and will help ease feelings of frustration.





Communication Strategies

Every family is different, though many families struggle to communicate across generations. But as a caregiver, you don't always have the luxury of avoiding difficult conversations (especially when it comes to handling your parents' finances).

Here are a few tips for communicating effectively as a caregiver for aging parents:

- **Engage in active listening:** Active listening is, by definition, intended to improve mutual understanding. If you intend to problem-solve or diffuse a situation, active listening is a critical first step. Active listening goes beyond hearing what someone says and focusing rather on the meaning and intent behind their words.
- **Be empathetic:** By the very fact that you are a caregiver for your parents, it's a good bet that you're an empathetic person. But it's still important to check in with your emotions and rationale when having difficult conversations, as you need to keep an open mind and remember the situation your parents are in. If you feel as though they're being unreasonable or lashing out, keep in mind that they may be projecting their feelings of frustration or helplessness onto you.
- **Involve other family members:** If you have siblings or aunts and uncles you're close with, try and include them in conversations when appropriate. This is not only for practical reasons (sometimes facts get lost in translation), but to maintain harmony amongst family as well. Your siblings may feel left out if not included in important conversations or feel hurt that you don't trust them enough to help out. Creating open communication and transparency from the start helps avoid this.

Practical Tips for Providing Care

What are some ways you can make the caregiving journey a little easier on yourself, your family, and your aging loved ones? Here are a few practical tips to consider.





Create a Safer Environment

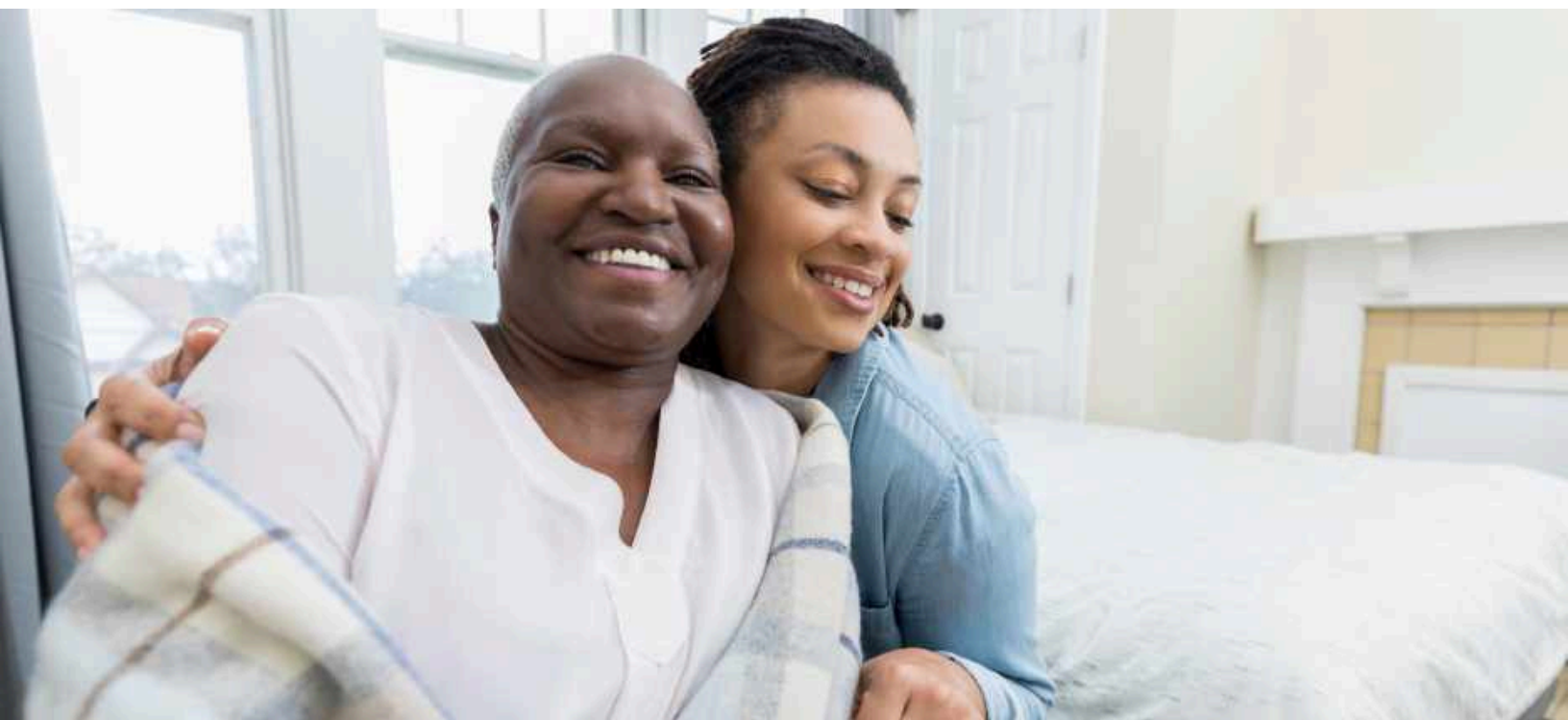
First and foremost, the safer you can make your parent's home, the less daily stress you'll experience. No one wants to feel constantly worried that their parents may trip on the stairs or hurt themselves in the shower.

Some common home modifications and safety measures include:

- Widening doorways and installing ramps for improved wheelchair or walk accessibility.
- Lowering counter heights and sinks in the kitchen to allow seniors to cook or wash dishes while sitting.
- Replacing the bathtub or shower with a walk-in shower or tub that includes a safety bar and bench.
- Taping down area rugs (or removing them altogether) to reduce the chance of tripping.
- Installing a medical alert system that will alert emergency services to a potential fall or injury.

Feel free to explore our resources:

- <https://www.assistedliving.org/virginia/>
- <https://www.assistedliving.org/assisted-living-near-me/>
- <https://www.assistedliving.org/cost-of-assisted-living/>
- <https://www.assistedliving.org/senior-housing/>





Seek Professional Assistance

Perhaps the most important tip of all is that you do not have to experience your caregiving journey alone. It's okay to ask for help, and there will be times when you need a professional's guidance to make informed, forward-focused decisions.

A financial advisor, for example, can help facilitate tough conversations between you and your parents regarding their financial well-being and the ongoing costs of care. An estate attorney is critical in addressing your parents' final wishes and ensuring all estate planning documents are up-to-date and legally binding.

In addition, you may want to contact a caregiving consultant or coach. These professionals live and breathe family caregiving, and they can provide ongoing practical support and advice that's tailored to your unique situation. They can also connect you with other professionals or volunteers including professional patient advocates, senior move managers, and insurance specialists.

Legal and Financial Considerations

Caregivers often either put off (or don't know about) obtaining a power of attorney and other important legal documents that can help them more effectively care for their parents. A power of attorney gives you, the caregiver, the ability to make decisions on your parent's behalf. Depending on what type of power is given, you may be able to make financial decisions (like selling their house), medical decisions (determining what type of treatment they'll receive), or a mix of both.

It's important to note that if a parent passes away, the power of attorney becomes null and void. That's why maintaining up-to-date estate planning documents is so important, as the estate's executor (as determined in the will) takes over.





Building a Support System

Again, we want to emphasize that you are not alone in your caregiving journey, and you may find it helpful to connect with local support groups. Your state's Department of Aging may be able to connect you with some of these organizations or provide additional resources. National organizations, like the Family Caregiver Alliance, offer online support groups as well.

We hope you found this information helpful and encouraging, we understand the unique challenges, as well as rewards, being a caregiver can bring. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions about managing your parent's finances, protecting your financial well-being, or building your team of support during this time.

Sources:

1Fact Sheet: Aging in the United States

2Key facts about family caregiver statistics: An introduction

