

Caregiving Basics

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When you first learn that a loved one needs help, it is hard to know where to begin. Sometimes there is a sudden change of health that prompts you to get involved. Other times it is a gradual realization that the person is no longer capable of meeting all their needs. In either situation, knowing what steps to take can be difficult. The following are some basic steps to get you started.

Learn about the person's illness, disease, or condition. Understanding the nature of the disease, its symptoms and what to expect, is helpful in caring for the person. Talk to a health care provider, research the internet, or read books or pamphlets to help you understand what the person is dealing with and specific ways you can help.

Determine areas of need. Write down your specific needs such as housecleaning, grocery shopping, meal preparation, help with bathing, and transportation to medical appointments. Then discuss possible ways to meet these needs with friends, family members, local agencies, and the person's health care provider.

Research community resources. Contact your Aging and Disability Resource Center for local resources and services. Explore options like home delivered or grab-and-go meals, in-home supportive care services, Lifeline, transportation services and adult day care. Contact organizations specific to the disease such as the Alzheimer's Association or the Stroke Foundation. Not all agencies are fully open, but staff will be available to answer the phone and assist you in meeting your needs.

Plan for immediate care. Find out what the person's wishes are for immediate and long-term care. Adapt the environment by doing a home safety check as well as purchasing items for any special needs such as a walker, commode, wheelchair, or other adaptive equipment. Find a way to log the person's health such as eating patterns, symptoms, and medications. This information is helpful at medical appointments.

Enlist the help of others. Determine what you can realistically do, then make a list of other people who can help. Don't try to do it all on your own. Write down tasks that others can help with, such as running errands or providing a meal. Many tasks can be completed while following social distancing guidelines.

Organize important information. Write down pertinent medical information including doctors' names and phone numbers, insurance information and medication/pharmacy information. Collect and list financial and other important information such as household bills, loans, bank accounts and insurance policies. Also include copies of social security, driver's license and insurance cards of the person being cared for. Be sure to keep this information in a safe location that other family members know about.

Plan for the future. Get information about the long-term prognosis in order to make appropriate plans. Assess the financial situation and contact a financial advisor who is familiar with caregiving issues if necessary. Talk to a lawyer about a durable power of attorney for health care and finances. Include the person as much as possible in the planning.

Take care of yourself, too. Find support through a friend, counselor, or support group. Many are meeting virtually during the pandemic and can be found here. (For those who get our newsletter in paper form, the link is <http://wisconsin caregiver.org/virtual-events-for-caregivers>) Talk about your struggles and how it feels to be a caregiver. Take regular breaks from caregiving and keep doing some activities or hobbies that bring you pleasure. Make sure you are eating well, getting enough sleep and exercise, and are staying connected with family or friends, at least by phone calls to keep yourself healthy. Ask for help. No one can do it all!

Contact your Aging and Disability Resource Center for information on caregiver support groups, local caregiving resources, a home safety checklist or to talk to someone about specific caregiving issues.

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