

Is An Aging Parent Overwhelming Your Life?

from the American Counseling Association

Improved health care and lifestyle changes have many more Americans living into their 80s and beyond. The result is that the grown children of many of these seniors now find themselves facing increasing demands for help. Sometimes it's a hard demand to meet.

While none of us wants to abandon an elderly parent facing mounting physical and psychological challenges, the needs of our own lives and families can make it difficult to always be available.

The result is often increased personal anxiety and stress, and a negative affect on family life. Providing the money, time and emotional energy that an elderly parent may require might mean that the grown child's own life and immediate family is paying the price as their own needs are neglected.

It's an increasingly common situation with no easy cures. But if such stress is something you're facing, try asking yourself some basic questions:

- Are the needs of your aging parent real, or simply the demands of an elderly parent who feels you "owe" help when and where he or she wants it?
- Can siblings help? Even children who are living far away, or are emotionally not close to that parent, can sometimes surprise with offers of aid when invited to help.
- Are there other sources of help? Neighbors or friends may be eager to offer help and reduce some of your burden. Your local Council on Aging can provide advice on appropriate services available.
- Are you prioritizing your time and activities? Your own family, as well as you yourself, deserve your attention and care. Sometimes saying "no" because your own needs and those of your family must be met is simply something that must be done.
- Are you managing your time well? Create a schedule to help an aging parent with small chores, like shopping or bill paying, rather than just being available on demand.

While it's natural to want to provide needed help as parents become older and less capable on their own, it's important to recognize that each of us has limits. Overextending yourself to help that elderly parent can result in negative consequences for you and your family that can bring a heavy price. Be realistic and reasonable about the help that you can provide and you'll better benefit yourself, your own family and your aging parent.

Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Suggested Release: week of March 24, 2014

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Who? Me? No, I'm Fine... I Don't Need Any Help

from the American Counseling Association

Most of us find asking for help difficult. It can make us feel weak and inadequate, which is hard to accept if we've been taught to be independent, strong and self-sufficient.

Yet, at times, life can seem overwhelming. Events or life situations may leave us feeling confused, troubled, depressed and unsure of how to make things better.

At such times most of us usually see two options. One is to tough it out, doing what we can while ignoring the rest and hoping things turn out okay. This approach, even if we finally muddle through, can cause tremendous stress and anxiety, and sometimes leads to much more serious problems.

The second option is turning to family or friends. That's not a bad choice if those we trust with our fears and problems truly are understanding and able to offer meaningful help.

But sometimes family or friends aren't available, or don't have the experience or time to provide needed assistance. That's when it's time to consider a third option – professional help.

Seeking out a professional counselor can be a difficult choice. It's not only asking for help, but doing so with a stranger, and one you have to pay. People may also fear mental health professionals, based on movie and TV stereotypes. Fictional counselors always seem to deal with "crazy" people, seldom seem to really help, and have clients who seem ashamed that they needed counseling help.

The truth, of course, is that most counseling isn't for "crazy" people, but rather for perfectly normal people facing problems that are negatively affecting their lives. It might be work concerns, family relations, school issues or a host of other everyday life situations. And it's often less expensive than imagined, especially with health insurance or through a community mental health center.

Professional counselors are trained to help people feeling overwhelmed and unsure of what to do next. They don't dictate cures to clients, but rather help patients uncover answers right for them.

Finding a counselor isn't difficult. Your local mental health association, the telephone yellow pages under "Counselors," an online search for licensed professional counselors, or going to the "Find A Counselor" link at the ACA website, www.counseling.org, can all help you find counseling assistance.

Getting needed help isn't a sign of weakness, but rather of the strength to recognize that your problems are real and that you want to do something about them.

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words: 400

Suggested Release: week of March 31, 2014
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How To Share Bad News With Your Children from the American Counseling Association

Most parents want to protect their children not only from physical danger, but also from the emotional pain that life can bring. While we accept that small hurts will happen -- a disagreement with a sibling or friend, the loss of a toy - we usually believe we're helping our young children by sheltering them from the bigger problems that can occur such as a serious illness, financial issues or marital problems.

Unfortunately, being overly protective can do harm. Kids are usually more aware of bad news than we suspect, but often get the details wrong and may even feel responsible for what has happened.

Most children know when a family is having problems, even if nobody has said anything directly to them. But, kids frequently get the news in bits and pieces that add up to an incomplete, confusing and often frightening picture.

The solution is to share information with your children. No child needs all the gory details of a job loss or a troubled marriage, but should have enough age-appropriate information to feel included and part of something important to the family.

Start by reassuring your children that what is happening is not their fault. Kids are used to being blamed for messing up, and they often assume that when trouble happens, whether it's economic woes or marital strife, it's usually because of something they did.

Reassure your children that you, their parents, are on top of things and are working to fix the problem. Let the kids know it's okay to ask about what's going on, especially if they see you upset, worried, angry or crying. Children feel reassured when they know they can ask questions, get information and feel included.

Of course, how much information you share depends on your children's ages. A young child doesn't understand economic issues associated with a job loss, but will know that you're upset, worried, and acting differently. Older children may need more details, both to keep them from blaming themselves for the problem and to help them prepare for changes that may be coming.

Communicating with your children about family problems or possible changes, should always be one of your first priorities. A child left in the dark is a frightened child.

If you need help, look for books at your library or bookstore on family communications, or talk to your child's school counselor about possible approaches.

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words: 399