

Partners in Care

By Lisa M. Petsche

Lisa M. Petsche is a social worker and a freelance writer specializing in boomer and senior health matters. She has personal and professional experience with elder care.

8 Reflections for a New Year of Caregiving

Questions and Suggestions May Prompt Resolutions

Whether you are new to caregiving or have been at it for a while, you may find yourself feeling overwhelmed and worried about your ability to handle all the responsibilities involved in looking after a relative with a long-term health condition.

What better time than the start of a new year to reflect on your role and how you might be better able to manage it? Take time to honestly answer the following questions and consider the suggestions included.

1. Do you accept the realities of your relative's health condition?

Some Advice:

- Give yourself permission to experience all emotions that surface. Acceptance opens the door to a variety of feelings.
- Grieve losses, but don't dwell on them.
- Recognize that there will be good days and bad days, and how you feel and what you can give may vary from day to day. Don't be too hard on yourself.

2. Are you opening to learning new things?

Advice:

- Educate yourself about your relative's diagnosis, and share the information with family and friends to help them understand.
- Be open to learning practical skills, such as proper transferring and bathing techniques. Mastering these tasks will make caregiving as safe, easy and pleasant as possible for both your relative and you.
- Find out about community services in your area that can help maximize your relative's independence and assist you with necessary tasks. The local Area Agency on Aging is a good resource.

3. Do you keep communication lines open?

Advice:

- Involve your relative (if able) and other family members in decision-making as much as possible. Don't shoulder the responsibility alone.
- Develop a partnership with involved healthcare professionals. Share information about your relative, ask questions, seek advice and offer opinions and suggestions.
- Keep family members informed of changes in your relative's status. Don't act as if things are okay when they're not.



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4. Are you prepared for changes and challenges?

Advice:

- Find out what to expect during the course of the illness, not only in terms of symptom progression but also caregiving skills, medical equipment and community supports that may be needed.
- Talk openly with your relative about his or her wishes. Discuss living arrangements, outside help, surrogate decision-making, medical intervention and end-of-life care, and funeral arrangements. Be careful not to make promises you may not be able to keep.
- Help your relative get his/her affairs in order, including completing paperwork such as advance directives, powers of attorney, and a will. Consult with a lawyer who's familiar with eldercare issues.

5. Are you open to simplifying your life?

Advice:

- Keep a caregiving log so you don't have to rely on memory when it comes to medical history. Include medications tried and their results, acute illnesses, hospitalizations, tests, diagnoses, treatments, and surgeries.
- Keep relevant medical, financial, legal, and other documents organized in a binder or filing system for quick and easy access.
- Seek ways to streamline your life. Set priorities and stick to them. And let go of the need for perfection.
- Take things one day at a time. Learn to live in the moment and focus on simpler pleasures.

6. Do you practice self-care?

Advice:

- Look after your health. Eat nutritious meals, get adequate rest, exercise and see your family doctor regularly.
- Find something relaxing you can do to give yourself a break at home, whether it's enjoying a cup of tea, reading something uplifting, writing in a journal, calling a friend or listening to music. Make it a daily habit.
- Schedule regular breaks from caregiving duties. Take a couple of hours, a day or an overnight.

7. Do you have supportive people in your life?

Advice:

- Stay connected to friends and outside activities.
- Find at least one person you can talk to openly--someone who will listen and empathize.
- Talk with other caregivers. Join a community support group or join an Internet group if it's hard to get out or you prefer anonymity.

8. Are you receptive to help?

Advice:

- Acknowledge your limitations. Recognize that you can't and shouldn't do everything alone.
- Accept offers of help. Ask other family members to share the load and be specific about the kind of help you need.
- Research and take advantage of respite services in your community.