



THE MIDDLE YEARS of LIFE

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CONCERN FOR AGING PARENTS

1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30
31	32	33	34	35	36
37	38	39	40	41	42
43	44	45	46	47	48
49	50	51	52	53	54
55	56	57	58	59	60
61	62	63	64	65	66
67	68	69	70	71	72
73	74	75	76	77	78
79	80	81	82	83	84
85	86	87	88	89	90
91	92	93	94	95	96
97	98	99	100	101	102

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Today, because of improved health care, sanitation and nutrition, human beings have the potential to live a long time—75 years or more. This means that many midlife persons (40-65 years of age) will be, or are, concerned with the needs and perhaps the care of their elderly parents.

Our society tends to value youth and its privileges rather than age and its wisdom. Believing the myth that aging automatically means ill health, reduced mental abilities and eventual extended care can make living to an advanced age look like a grim prospect.

The Facts

Actually, only 5 percent of older people are in nursing homes at any given time. About 23 percent of individuals over 65 will spend some time in a nursing home during their lives.

Many older people live with their spouses or alone. Census figures indicate that only one-third of the older persons who have children live in combined households with them. These combined households do not necessarily mean the older persons are dependent. The families may live in the older person's home or the two families may share in the upkeep of a home. For many older persons with families, the families are their main source of affection, companionship and assistance in times of illness or emergency, even when they do not live together.

Over two-thirds of all older people in the United States think their health is good or excellent. There are, in fact, many vigorous, creative and alert people over 70 years of age.

Our Reactions

How we react to aging parents and how we handle the emotional and sometimes physical and financial demands on us during the lifetime of aging parents depend on the following:

- 1. How well we are able to accept our own aging and eventual death:** At some time during the midlife period, most people come to realize their own mortality as they notice signs of aging in themselves. If we dread old age, our parents' aging may be very threatening. If we have a generally positive attitude, we are more likely to be able to reach out to our elderly parents.
- 2. Our understanding of the aging process itself:** Each person is a unique individual with his or her own lifestyle, experiences, attitudes and genetic makeup. These factors make the aging process different for each person. However, the older years are marked by a gradual slowing down of bodily functions and systems.

Manual dexterity, vision, hearing, taste and smell sensitivity, ability to digest food easily, and strength and endurance all decrease.

- 3. The health of the aging parent and amount of help he/she needs:** The elderly parent who is able to care for him/herself and maintain an independent household, except for occasional physically demanding tasks, places little stress upon the adult child. Adult children with a parent with mobility problems or memory lapses, even though living in his/her own home, may feel anxious and frustrated.
- 4. Physical and emotional resources of the adult child:** An aging parent's needs may increase at the same time that the adult child is beset by other heavy demands, such as coping with teen-agers or young adult children, becoming grandparents, going through menopause, feeling career pressures or possibly retiring. Adult children may get caught in a double bind—if they don't help their parents, they may feel guilty, and if they do, they may feel resentful that their resources for coping are being stretched so thin.
- 5. Previous history of the parent/child relationship:** If past relationships between adult child and aging parent have been good and there have been feelings of love, compassion, respect and tenderness, then aging is not likely to affect the relationship. If such feelings as resentment, anger, contempt, shame or fear have been part of the relationship, the simple fact of a parent's reaching an advanced age is unlikely to improve it.
- 6. Financial resources available:** If the elderly parent needs financial assistance from the adult child, providing it may put severe strains upon the adult child's standard of living. In the face of rising cost of living and the high costs of educating his/her own children, the adult child may resent increased financial pressures from the elderly parent.
- 7. Available community resources:** Community resources to assist elderly persons in maintaining their independence can be of immense help to adult children. The availability of services that provide some physical care, offer emotional support and activities, or provide adequate nutrition or transportation may determine whether the aging parent and adult children are able to maintain separate households.

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Planning Ahead

The adult child and his or her aging parents can make the task of coming to terms with aging easier by preparing for it. Discussions between the parents and children and an investigation of existing resources within the family and the community, before they are needed, may prove extremely helpful in maintaining the independence of elderly parents and avoiding future problems.

Services that may be available in your community are home health care, visiting nurses, home delivery of meals, telephone reassurance programs, transportation services, senior centers and senior housing programs.

The time may come when your elderly parent(s) can no longer live independently. Before reaching a decision as important as joining households, seriously consider and discuss each other's feelings and needs and all possible solutions with the individuals involved. Similar family conferences with your brothers and sisters can give all the siblings an opportunity to say what is on their minds and work out ways to share the burden of care. Consider the following questions as you talk together:

What are all the possible living arrangements for the elderly parents?

How satisfactory to the adult children and the elderly parents are these alternative living arrangements?

How does/do your parent(s) feel about moving into your home?

How does your spouse feel about it? Your children?

Do you have enough space to make it workable for an extended period of time? Will both adult child and parent(s) be able to meet their needs for privacy?

Who will assume the financial obligations for the elderly parents?

Have you and your parent(s) been able to maintain a positive relationship in the past? Are personalities compatible?

Does/do the parent(s) have friends nearby so that he or she would not be totally dependent on you and your family for companionship and entertainment?

Does/do your parent(s) feel at home with your lifestyle?

How will you handle household decisions?

Are there adequate medical services nearby?

The behavior of family members toward one another is a complex process governed by a wide range of feelings. It is important that adult children take stock of their feelings about their aging parents as well as gain an understanding of what they can and cannot do for their parents. Caring for elderly parents can be a growth experience for all family members, providing adequate preparation has taken place.

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