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The First Step: Discussing the Need for Long-Term Care

If you need long-term care, you may find it hard to raise the topic with others because it seems like a blow to your self-esteem — a subject that means you are really "old." You may also be reluctant to begin the process of giving up some of your independence or surrendering full control over your life. If you know you will need the help of your family, you may hesitate to raise the subject because you don't want to become a burden.

On the other hand, if you believe that someone else — a family member or other loved one — is in need of care, you may be reluctant to bring up the subject because it may seem like a challenge or an insult. Also, within the family there may be anxiety, guilt, and wide differences of opinion about what care is needed and who should provide it. The first step in getting necessary care is to overcome this reluctance to talk about it.



Getting Help From Others

To get the discussion underway and stay on the right track, it is often best to look outside the family. An unrelated person can sometimes soothe the ruffled family feathers, present a neutral opinion, and offer solutions the family might not know about. Also, you and your family members may find it easier to reveal fears and other feelings to an outsider than to an involved family member.

Here are some people who can help you begin to evaluate long-term care needs:

- Your personal physician is often a good place to start, not necessarily to moderate discussions but to define medical needs and refer you to others who may be helpful in making care arrangements.
- Traditional word-of-mouth is still one of the best ways to begin tackling any new problem. Friends and neighbors whose opinions you trust, and who may have already faced similar situations, are often a good source of information. The people at your local senior center may also know of sources for long-term care assistance. These word-of-mouth sources often let you know of "unofficial" personal care aides who would not be available through more formal channels.
- A clergy member may be able to help directly or to refer you and your family to professionals who can introduce alternatives and coordinate planning.
- County family service agencies, Area Agencies on Aging, or other senior information and referral services are experienced sources that can provide direct access to specific care providers and help you develop an overall care plan. These agencies can direct you to a counselor or social worker who specializes in long-term care for elders and can help you begin your discussions and planning.
- If residence in a nursing facility is not absolutely necessary, many people make use of the services of a professional geriatric care manager to see what at-home and other supportive services are available and to organize care from different providers.
- If your loved one has Alzheimer's disease or a similar mental impairment, you can turn to organizations that specialize in this disease.

Assessing Medical Needs

Because a specific physical or mental condition often leads to the need for long-term care, one of the first things to do is get professional advice both about the need for immediate care and about likely changes in the condition over time.

Talk first with your primary care physician; he or she may refer you to a geriatric specialist for further consultation. If you are not completely comfortable with the physician's assessment, seek a second opinion.

Another excellent resource to help you assess medical and personal care needs is a geriatric screening program. Local hospitals have them, as do community and county health centers. If you have trouble finding a geriatric screening program, check with the county social service agency or local Area Agency on Aging, local numbers can be found through an online search or in your local phone book.

Assessing Personal Needs and Capabilities

You will also have to figure out what sort of personal, non-medical care is needed and what aspects of daily life the elder can still manage without outside assistance. The need and ability to care for oneself is not simply a matter of physical competence. Often, it depends just as much on personality and emotional state. So don't just consider what kind of care is needed and whether providers are available and affordable. The ultimate decisions should also depend on how important it is to the elder to remain in control of his or her own life.

Some people fiercely hold on to personal independence and privacy. For these people, it may be important to stay at home and receive only minimal outside assistance (if they also have the ability to organize, manage, and pay for individual programs to meet their specific needs).

Others may be willing to have an outside agency organize a more comprehensive care program, as long as they or their family members remain in primary control of daily life. For these people, an agency-directed program of home care in a family residence or in secured housing, perhaps combined with adult daycare, may be the best option, especially if family members are willing to give additional assistance.

Still other people prefer the security and ease of complete care organized and provided by others. For them, a residential care facility may be best, even though they may not physically require the high level of care offered there.

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Eat Well, for Your Children's Sake

You can tell your children how to eat well, but experts say it's better to show them.

Children learn by watching their parents. If your favorite restaurant is the All You Can Eat Buffet and your number one vegetable is the french fry, you're sending the wrong message.

Good role models have never been more important. One in five kids is seriously overweight. High cholesterol and type 2 diabetes are rising steadily among the young.

Children must learn from their parents and caregivers to value themselves, eat nutritiously, and get proper exercise and rest.

Here's some expert advice:

Dine as a family. As part of a Harvard Medical School study, researchers looked at the eating habits of thousands of 9- to 14-year-olds. They found that children who regularly ate dinner with their family consumed more fruits, vegetables and fiber and less saturated fat, trans fat, fried foods and soda.

Go for healthy foods and drinks. The Children's Nutrition Research Center (CNRC) at Baylor College of Medicine found that girls' drink choices mirrored their mothers' choices. Girls were more likely to choose milk over soft drinks because their mothers did so.

Switch to smaller portions. Super-sized portions can hurt children's eating habits and waistlines. It takes just 48 extra calories a day (seven potato chips) to gain five pounds a year. If possible, let children serve themselves.

Eat out with restraint. Visit restaurants just once or twice a week, and press children to get small orders of fast food if no healthier choice is available. Share a dinner portion with children and add a salad or other vegetables if children are still hungry.

Let children make decisions. A CNRC study of 5-year-old girls found that when parents tightly controlled their children's diets, the children were more likely to eat more of the foods parents were trying to limit.

Provide a variety of healthy choices. Then let children choose from that selection. This satisfies children's need for independence and gives parents some control over what their children eat.

Maintain a healthy weight. Avoid unhealthy approaches to weight loss, such as fad diets or diet pills. Emphasize the importance of being fit and healthy as opposed to being thin.

Stay active. Eating is just part of the equation. Stay physically active as a family by walking, biking or swimming. Limit kids' time in front of the television and computer.

Krames Staywell

Friends Are Good for Your Health

Everybody needs friends, but not everybody knows how to make friends and keep them. Demands from job and family can leave many people with little energy for bringing new people into their lives or for nurturing the relationships they already have. But friends are important to your health.

"Research has shown that people who do not have strong support from friends and family live shorter lives and suffer more from stress," says Cheryl A. Richey, Ph.D., professor of social work at the University of Washington. "Support from friends can give people the strength to make positive changes in their lives, like staying away from drugs or leaving an abusive relationship."

Some people may find it difficult to make friends because they lack the skills needed to interact effectively with other people and build supportive social contacts. People are not born with these skills; they need to learn them.

Where do you begin?

"Rather than setting a broad goal like 'making new friends,' break that goal down into small steps you can tackle," Dr. Richey suggests.

The first step may be to make a vow to start one conversation each day with someone you don't know well, for example, the new person at your office or a visitor to your church. It may help to rehearse ahead of time, by figuring out a topic and opening line, and even practicing with a supportive family member or trusted friend.

For some, meeting new people may be the easy part. The difficulty is knowing how to advance from being acquaintances to becoming friends. Disclosing information about yourself is one way to build trust in a friendship. Another is reciprocating -- for example, by listening carefully when others disclose information about themselves, or more concretely, by trading baby-sitting for other favors.

Cultivate friendships

Some people find themselves without support not because they can't initiate social contacts but because they've burned out their friends by asking for help too often and not returning it, or by violating trust such as telling others a secret shared in confidence.

To reconnect with a strained social network, Dr. Richey recommends initiating contacts during times when you are not in need of support. This can begin with a simple, problem-free conversation.

"To rebuild relationships, it's important to become more reliable, responsible and reciprocal in your daily associations," Dr. Richey says.

Even if your social network is supportive, having too many people around all the time may interfere with private time for you and your family. Part of social skill-building is setting limits in a relationship, or keeping a relationship on an acquaintance level rather than pursuing close friendship.

And, in the end, the number of social relationships isn't nearly as important as their quality. A person with a huge social network could be worse off than a loner if most of those social contacts are draining and negative.

"It's more than just a body count," Dr. Richey said. "Look at the kinds of exchanges you have with the people in your network, and whether these people can provide the kind of assistance or support that will be helpful."