



Caregiver Stress: 12 Tips for Adult Children of Aging Parents

by award-winning author / stress-relief expert Susie Mantell

Even in the best of circumstances, it is a delicate balance to organize a life in such a way as to sleep enough, work enough, connect with others enough, enjoy some meaningful time alone, and still get to all the things we love or need to do. In all walks of life, people are coping with work-related health issues, while suffering from sleep deprivation and too little time for themselves.

Many baby-boomers are finding themselves in what's been dubbed "*The Sandwich Generation*." They are caring for aging parents while still parenting children. At the same time, they are also beginning to address some health issues of their own, as well as explore retirement plans. While aggressive research is underway to help us to age more healthily, the next decade or two will be challenging. We will need to plan and act purposefully to be the healthiest, happiest people we can be, no matter the hands we are dealt. *(NOTE: If you've not yet reached this stage, savor the present and plan ahead. If you are beyond the hurdle of caring for your parents or kids, there are some interesting suggestions here for you, too, and perhaps some that you can share with others.)*

Q: Dear Susie, For three years I have visited my beloved father 3-4 times each week, as Alzheimer's slowly takes him away from me. My mother, my wife, my siblings and I are all under tremendous stress. Some days, Dad doesn't know us. My mother is a brave woman but deeply depressed. I am torn between my heartfelt wish to meet both of my parents' various needs, while being there for my wife and our children. I fear losing not only my parents, but my own zest for life, my interests, and even my friends because I am so consumed. How can I help my father to find what peace and pleasure he can? I am committed to those I love, to my career, and to my own physical, emotional and spiritual health, but how can I balance it all and enjoy some kind of life for myself without feeling guilty?

A: Dementia slowly steals our loved ones from us, memory by memory. Every glimmer of recognition or response at once warms our heart as well as breaks it. Yours is a sad and complicated situation that is affecting many, many families today. Thousands live in the cruel and complex tangle of long-term illness, and it can get pretty dark in there. It is a sacred trust to care for elders in their decline. After a lifetime of being "parented" to greater and lesser degrees, now loving and caring for aging parents is both a profound honor and a solemn, unfamiliar responsibility. Circumstances and needs shift, creating opportunities for us to be of service and support to them as they were for us, and to accompany them on this leg of their journey.

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The challenge is to do this in ways that:

- a. demonstrate respect and compassion for their tremendous frustration at this time in their lives
- b. afford them as much independence as possible, in every way possible, for as long as possible
- c. meet their physical, emotional and safety needs and provide spiritual support
- d. maintain our own balance, relationships, wellness and as much normalcy as possible.

12 Tips for Caregivers Providing Long-Term Care:

1. Let your friends know you need them now, and will be needing them going forward. Cherished friends would like to help, but they truly may not know what you need. Call a friend *today*, and make a date to go to an upbeat movie and out for a bite, so you can talk. If time is short, schedule a 'phone date' to talk things over. Take yourself to a museum or for a walk in the park. Go to the library and browse, or buy a juicy novel.
2. As adult children and their parents age, there are many community resources, TV news segments and books available to help you to determine what are the best courses of action and care that are right for your family.
3. Find a skilled and compassionate geriatric physician with whom to consult. Find an experienced geriatric psychotherapist with whom your mother might also share and release some of her sadness and anger, and explore her own needs for assistance and reassurance. In some cases, antidepressant medications may be appropriate, but that should be a geriatric physician's decision and must be monitored closely. Just as you wouldn't give a small child an adult dose of a medication, dosages of most medications are very, very different for seniors, compared to younger adults.
4. Invest a little time in yourself. Look around your home and choose a manageable creative project you would like to accomplish, preferably something you can do in a day. New bed linens? A picture you've been meaning to frame? Paint a room a fresh new color?
5. Health care providers may not have known our loved ones when they were themselves. Place photos of your parent in better times on his night-table, bureau, etc. that introduce those who care for him to who's really in there. These may help you and your loved one, too. I once saw an aged woman sporting a "button" her kids made her, with a photo of her laughing, wind-blown, on a ski trip. It told a wonderful story.

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- Put together a family photo album of very special memories. Really get into it. Cry, laugh, journal as you do. Remember every day who your parent is, was and always will be for you, regardless of his present condition.
- Compile a colorful, cheerful book for your parent to look at. Perhaps it will connect him to those he loves and help him to remember happy times. Include lots of pictures of you, your mom, siblings, children, pets, vacations. Introduce soothing music from "the good old days" for fun.

Idea: After my sister passed away, I felt an enormous need to feel connected to all of my loved ones, here and gone. I chose to create a photo archive of my family, annotated with stories from the 1800's through the present, and including what I called "isms" (e.g. *life lessons my grandfather taught us and funny things my mother used to say for each family member, right through the youngest generation, who were then 6 and 8 years old.*) Over many months, I gradually compiled the book of histories of each branch of the family and illustrated it with hundreds of photographs. I used an online service that created a beautiful, hard-cover book with glossy pages, and gave copies to family members. Best of all, I bring it when I visit a cherished family member living with advanced dementia, and read her those stories. Much like the book, *The Notebook*, I am never quite certain if she recognizes it as her own childhood and family story or just a lovely, comforting, familiar one. But she listens intently and sometimes smiles at the comfort of it, which brings me deep joy.

- Schedule at least one daily pleasure for yourself, with no exceptions. Try massage, exercise, lunch with a friend, sports, time to journal, a cleansing cry, a peaceful nap.
- You have been, and will be, knocked off-center many times in this process of caring for a parent who is changing in ways that are sad and confusing. Find a skilled counselor with expertise in eldercare to talk with. You deserve it. Good professional counseling can provide unbiased perspective and support for all the emotions you are experiencing, as you try to make both your parents' lives as comfortable and peaceful, joyful and safe as you can. See Cleveland Clinic article about Caregiver Burnout:
http://my.clevelandclinic.org/disorders/Alzheimers_Disease/hic_Caregiving_Recognizing_Burnout.aspx
- Long-term illness tends to either pull families together or tear them apart. Spend time talking with and listening to your children, wife and siblings. Listen between the words, and let them know that while you are sad, you can reassure them that you are taking good care of yourself at the same time. We never know when hard times will befall us, and your example can help them to cope throughout a lifetime.

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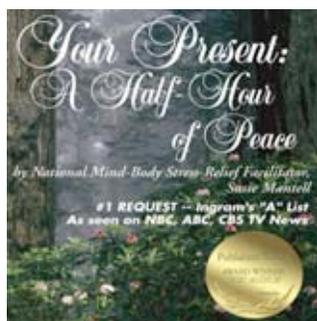
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- 11. We all know that pets can bring exquisite comfort. If your loved one cannot have a pet now, buy a small ultra-soft, cuddly stuffed animal your parent can hold and stroke for comfort and companionship. Many with dementia find holding a soft baby-doll or a stuffed animal deeply comforting and great company.
- 12. Music is fun , comforting, and it brings us all back to the place and time when we first heard or danced to a song. Fill their days with music from the 40's, and Broadway, and movies, and childhood. Even after many have lost the capacity for speech, they can still sing, and even later, enjoy listening!

In very special ways, these too are precious days with your parents. Live each one in ways that will allow you to respect yourself when you look back. You'll be glad you did.

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