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10 Common Mistakes That Family Caregivers Make

Experts share how to avoid these caregiving pitfalls

By Bruce Horovitz, AARP

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ILLUSTRATION: JARED ORIEL

Family caregivers make mistakes. If they didn't, they wouldn't be human. Yet these caregivers of older parents and friends are handed the impossible task of making everything OK on their

watch. But when they make a mistake — big or small — it often feels to them as if they have committed a crime.

The real crime is taking mistakes personally. The opportunity is to learn from these errors. That's why AARP reached out to gerontologists, professors and authors who have written about adult caregiving to find out what they believe are the most common miscues that adult caregivers make — and how to prevent them. This is what the experts revealed:



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1. Holding back the offer to help adult parents

Sometimes the biggest mistake can be waiting to assist aging parents. "Out of respect for their parents, many hold back too long to help their relatives," says Donna Benton, a research associate professor of gerontology at the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology in Los Angeles.

The secret sauce for getting parents to accept your help, she says, is often in how you present it. Parents are often more likely to accept help from an adult child if you make the request about your well-being, not just theirs, she says. For example, you might earn their trust by saying something like, "If you let me help around the house and let me drive you more often, it will help me to worry less about you," says Benton.

2. Failing to report medical side effects to the doctor

Adult family caregivers are typically pretty good at listening to — and accurately abiding by — any medical advice a doctor provides to their parents or loved ones. Unfortunately, that's where the help stops. Too often, caregivers fail to report back to the doctor on possible side effects from any medication or treatment, says Benton.

Don't ever be afraid to question side effects, says Benton. For example, if there's a change in personality over a day or two, it might have something to do with the medication, she says. To do this, though, you must have open communication with your loved one's doctors, which might also require advance verbal or written permission from your parent.

3. Trying to change lifelong habits of your parent

Suppose, for example, the parent who you are providing care has eaten junk food — like candy, soda pop and potato chips — all their lives. On top of that, they've never much liked to exercise and prefer to sit on the couch much of the day watching TV. But their doctor has asked them to eat better and exercise more. Where does that leave you?

It's not likely that you're going to be successful at getting a parent to change their lifetime bad habits, says Pamela Wilson, an adult caregiving expert, advocate and speaker. But there is a middle ground. You may want to validate by telling your parent that you agree their doctor is asking for a lot. Even, then, you need to advise them of the consequences that are likely to occur if they continue to ignore their doctor's advice, says Wilson. As long as a person is fully aware of the repercussions of not taking care of their health condition, they have the right to say no, she says. "You have to have the conversation that asks: What is your plan if you get too sick and can no longer stay in the house?"

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4. Disregarding the financial aspects of caregiving

All aspects of health care are expensive. The best time to speak with your parents about the [costs of caregiving](#) and healthcare is before they actually need it, says Wilson. Talking about money with your parents is hard, but it's much harder under the stress of a medical event, says Wilson. "You have got to find out how your parents have planned for care needs — or not," she says.



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This financial discussion ultimately should include getting all the important paperwork done — including getting [access and passwords](#) to their online bank and brokerage accounts. If they don't have a plan — which is often the case — it's time to help them start to make one.

5. Forgetting to plan social opportunities for your parent

For overburdened caregivers, it's tempting to laser focus on the most important things — like picking up groceries and medicine — and ignore the things you believe you don't absolutely have to do, like arranging social outings for your parent. But [social isolation](#) is incredibly damaging to the physical and mental health of older adults, says Sharona Hoffman, professor of law and bioethics at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. "It's important to make sure they are interacting with others and engaging in activities — even if they have dementia," she says.

This is the sort of task for which you can certainly reach out for help, says Wilson. There's probably a volunteer at their church or synagogue who would be willing to drive them to a

service. And they may have neighbors who want to help but don't know what to do. These nearby friends could be encouraged to take your parent for a walk around the block or take them to activities at the local senior center.

6. Assuring your parent that they can age in place

Many older adults are understandably adamant about wanting to age in place. After all, there is often comfort in the familiar. And many want nothing to do with living only with their peers. But it's still a mistake to assure your parent that you will make certain they will always be able to stay in their own home, says Hoffman.

"If they live alone at home, there is a real risk that they will become socially isolated," says Hoffman. So, for many older adults who mostly just see their caregivers and their doctors, it would be a mistake not to at least explore the possibility of [senior communities](#) or [assisted living](#) options, she says.

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7. Thinking you're a bad caregiver if you make a mistake

People need to understand that adult caregiving is a very, very hard job, says William Haley, professor at the School of Aging Studies at the University of South Florida located in Tampa, Florida. There are so many things a caregiver must be: a nurse, psychologist, dietician, activity director, financial manager, housekeeper and safety inspector. "It's very challenging to manage all of these duties," he says.

In the end, every caregiver will make mistakes. What's most critical is not to take mistakes personally but to think of them as learning opportunities. This is an issue that may lead some caregivers to feel depressed — especially those who are perfectionists, he says. Don't let that happen, Haley advises. "There's a long learning curve."

8. Waiting for a crisis to ask for help from others

Caregivers tend to think they can do everything — until they can't. Then, by the time a crisis occurs and they desperately need assistance, that help is not immediately available. Why wait? poses Haley. Many caregivers, by nature, are used to doing for others but not for themselves. It's crucial to nix that mindset early on.

The best way to seek help is early — and to ask, initially, for smaller things. Maybe there's a sibling who is good at math and would be happy to help with the bill-paying. Or maybe there's a neighbor who would like to stop by and visit with Mom weekly. At the same time, you want to make certain

that before your parent faces a health crisis you've had them sign proper paperwork that gives you [power of attorney](#).

9. Neglecting self-care

It's one thing to get your parent to a doctor's appointment or to the hair salon, but what about yourself? asks Benton. Forgetting to [self-care](#) — like getting [regular exercise](#) and respite from caregiving duties — is one of the most common mistakes made by adult caregivers. It is also the one thing that can be among the most crushing because it can ultimately result in you [burning out](#) or even getting sick.

What happens to your loved one if you aren't available to care for them? she asks. "You don't want to get sicker than the person you're caring for."

10. Minimizing the importance of their caregiving

Adult caregivers are often so busy caregiving that they forget how critical their mission is for their parents — and for themselves, says Haley.

Think of all the good things you're doing. You may be helping a parent to stay a bit longer in the home that they love. You may be the one who is feeding them their favorite foods daily. Or be the person who is the conduit to them seeing their friends. That's why it's important to take the time to reflect on the joy and comfort you're bringing to a family member by being their caretaker, Haley says, "And not taking the easy way out."

Bruce Horovitz is a contributing writer who covers personal finance and caregiving. He previously wrote for The Los Angeles Times and USA Today. Horovitz regularly writes for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, Investor's Business Daily, AARP The Magazine, AARP Bulletin, Kaiser Health News and PBS's Next Avenue.

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