

Spouses and Care

Spouses are the primary people to become caregivers when a person becomes elderly, frail or disabled. The spouse is generally the closest person to the one who needs care, and also the person who the care recipient trusts the most. Unfortunately, this assumption that the spouse must therefore provide all of the care can place an undue burden on him or her—particularly if he or she is also elderly.

Help for the Spouse

Caregiving spouses should not think that they have to do everything by themselves. Looking for help—from home care agencies, social workers, senior centers, friends and other family members—can benefit both the person needing care and the spouse.

If your father and mother are in this situation, do

Communication is key in families where one elderly parent is being cared for by the other.

Help from family, friends and social service agencies can relieve much of the stress.

not hesitate to offer your help as needed. Ask what they need. Help them find services available to them. Help to organize a network of other family members, friends and neighbors. As an adult child, you have much to offer, even when one of your parents is the primary caregiver for the other.

Guilt

Sometimes, when a spouse falls ill, the other feels guilty if they are not able to provide adequate care. This guilt can get in the way of their looking for help, support and other needed services. For this reason, spouses as caregivers are particularly at risk for depression, denial and caregiver burn-out; therapy can be an effective means of dealing with some of the emotions that may get in the way of effective caregiving by a spouse.



Society typically views women as caregivers. But in many cases, it's the husband who must provide care for his wife.

Gendered Dynamics

When it is a man who needs care, often his wife will provide it—even if she herself is becoming frail. This kind of relationship can present a problem, since the wife may not seek help when she needs it.

Research has shown that in families where a caregiver is needed, the role typically falls to a woman; in our society, caregiving is typically associated with women. Thus, when a woman is the one who needs care, it can be a potentially distressing situation for both her and her spouse.

If this is the situation in your family, seek help from social workers, therapists and other professionals who are skilled in working through the dynamics of gender and caregiving. In these situations, hiring help from outside the home can alleviate some of the stress on a husband who is not used to being in the caregiving role. Communication in such families is critical as well, and many husbands are able to become caregivers without any problems.