

Accepting Change

Age changes us in fundamental ways. We become more susceptible to disease. We become more dependent upon others. We begin to confront our mortality. These changes are hard on the elderly, but they are also difficult for their caregivers. It is never easy to accept that the person you care for is not who they once were.

If it is your spouse that you are caring for, you may miss the times when you were a team—working together equally to solve problems and to care for each other. Suddenly, your spouse is weaker than you and needs you to be the strong, healthy one. And this may come at a time when you yourself are worried about aging and health problems.

If it is your mother or father, these changes can be particularly difficult; here is the person who you have looked up to your whole life, who you thought could solve everything, who was invincible. Suddenly, they are weak, needy and fallible. Even if it isn't one of your parents, but another older relative—or someone you are hired to care for—the changes that age brings can be disconcerting.

Dealing with the changes that age brings takes several stages:

Identifying

Sometimes we don't see the changes that are happening in the people we see everyday. We may not notice someone's hearing or eyesight that is failing, or we may not listen as closely as we could when they describe their symptoms or problems. It is vital that we make a special effort to watch for changes; even small differences in behavior, thoughts or emo-

tions may signal larger problems. Talk with the person you care for—ask them how they are feeling, what they are thinking—and make sure to listen closely to their responses.

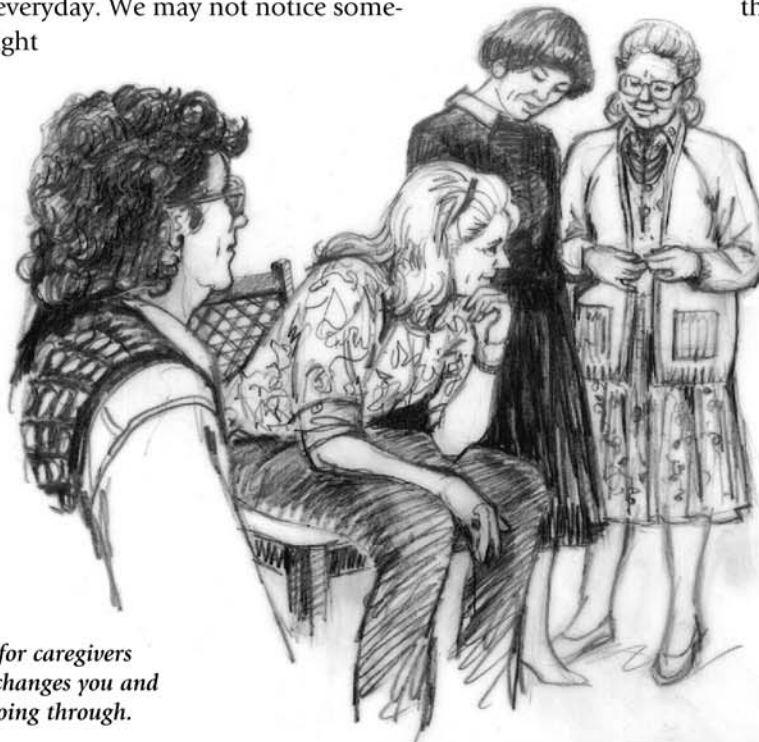
Understanding

When someone for whom you care is undergoing physical, emotional or mental changes, it is useful for you to understand these changes as completely as possible. Talk to a doctor, join a support group, study up on the disease on the Internet or in the public library. In short, educating yourself can help you to understand change—which is an important step toward accepting it.

Accepting

After you identify and understand the changes, you will be in a better position to accept them. This stage can be further facilitated by meeting with a counselor, friend or religious leader who can help you learn to live with the changes. The changes in your loved one's body and mind may also lead to changes in living arrangements, where an assisted living facility or nursing home can provide the level of care that they need. Remember that change is a natural and predictable part of growing old. The more you can accept it, the more you will be in a

position to provide loving care to those who most need your help. Find tools that can help everyone to regain the emotional intimacy that is lost. Sharing memories, creating new ones, sitting in the garden, talking about the family all help to keep your loved one connected to you. They may also help the family to confront their fears regarding loss and mortality.



Joining a support group for caregivers can help you accept the changes you and your loved one may be going through.



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