

Community Resources & Self-Care

Many middle-aged and older women caregivers say they would take better care of themselves if only they had enough energy. Fatigue is a common complaint; it usually arises because caregivers are embarrassed or unwilling to ask for help. It also comes about because of a lack of awareness of the wealth of home-based elder care services that exist in every community.

A 1999 National Family Caregivers Association survey found that most caregivers wait four or five years before reaching out for support. Why? Experts say personal attitudes are the biggest barrier. These may include the belief that seeking help is a sign of weakness, that no one can care for a relative as well as a family member, that strangers in the home are a risk, and that it's selfish to take a break when a family member is ill.

Because caregiver burnout can lead to unwanted institutionalization of the loved one, it only makes sense to care for oneself as well. Using community resources can make the difference between reward and burden, yet self-nurturing usually comes last – if at all. From respite breaks and eating well to learning hands-on skills, there are many programs that can help caregivers make healthful choices for care that include themselves.

Because there is no single entry point into the long-term care network, the best place to find these supportive services is by calling the local Area Agency on Aging (AAA), also known as the Department or Office on Aging. Services provided by the AAA range from housing, medical, mental health and social services to legal and financial counseling.

Many programs are free. These often include friendly visitors, telephone reassurance, Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program (HICAP; Medicare and long-term care insurance information), Social Security district offices (Medicare, Medi-Cal, SSI), legal aid, senior centers, home repairs, hospital discharge planners (social workers or nursing staff who help arrange home care), support groups (regular meetings for caregivers through social service agencies, medical societies, on-line chat), and peer counseling.

Low-cost services often include Meals on Wheels, utility bill assistance, and transportation services.

There are also many community services available on a fee-for-service basis. These usually include:

- Home health care (skilled nursing and physical or speech therapy, nutrition, social worker counseling, health aides);
- Adult day health care;
- Chore and homemaker services (help with heavy housework, minor repairs, personal care, household management);
- Respite care (for the loved one or the caregiver);
- Hospice (Medicare's end-of-life benefit);
- Equipment rental, such as, hospital beds and wheelchairs, and support groups provided through Medical societies; and
- Geriatric care management (help families assess, plan, and monitor elder care needs).

Long-term care policies may also cover some of these services. In addition, other community-based groups may offer a variety of elder care and/or family support services (ask whether they

are free, low-cost, or fee-based): faith-based organizations, fraternal and civic groups, the United Way, hospital senior services, disease-related organizations, university nursing programs, and employer human resource departments.

“It's important to acquire skills and knowledge to provide safe care, but it's also critical to maintain one's health and emotional balance” says Marion Karpinski, director of Healing Arts Communications and author of *Quick Tips for Caregivers*. “Effective tools include setting reasonable limits on how much one can do, asking others for help, cultivating an attitude of loving detachment, establishing effective emotional boundaries, and setting time aside for things you find rejuvenating.”

To find your local AAA, call the national ElderCare Locator at (800) 677-1116 or check your phone book's county pages under “Senior Services.”

For more information and free brochures on long-term care planning, contact the California Department of Health Services, California Partnership for Long-Term Care at (800) CARE445.

Beth Witrogen McLeod is a journalist, speaker, and consultant on caregiving, spirituality, and wellness at midlife. Her most recent book is “Caregiving: The Spiritual Journey of Love, Loss, and Renewal” (Wiley, 2000).