

The Caregiver's Survival Guide

The caregiver's learning is typically long and hard, says Jim Scott, cofounder and editor in chief of Caring.com. "Most people eventually figure it out—after a lot of hard knocks, unnecessary mistakes, and missed opportunities for help," he says. Here, his Reader's Digest Version of the mistakes that hurt and the steps that help most.

What Doesn't Work

- **Denying it** "People avoid acknowledging a problem like Alzheimer's disease in a family member as long as possible—chalking it up to a bad day or to normal aging is much easier. But waiting only makes it harder for everyone involved."
- **Going it alone** "You may think you're the only one who can do the caregiving, or you may not be aware of resources that are out there. Or maybe you think help is too expensive or too hard to find. But your health will suffer, your relationships will suffer, and ultimately, the caregiving itself will suffer."
- **Getting into a power struggle** "Your loved one is trying to maintain control in a stage of life that's all about losing it. Attempting to take away decision making too early or in a way that feels threatening can lead to huge blowups."
- **Blaming the person instead of the disease** "People with dementia repeat themselves. They forget to turn off the stove. They put the remote control in the garbage. They miss the toilet when urinating. Understanding that it's the disease, not the person, makes it easier

to manage the symptoms. You can be much more effective that way."

What Helps

- **Becoming aware of your loved one's finances** "Con artists know that in dementia, a person's finances can be one of the first things to fall apart. What are the signs that you should step in? Anything that points to a problem with complex, multistep thinking. Say your mom is a great cook. If all of a sudden she can't follow a recipe, she probably can't balance her checkbook." Get her on a do-not-call list, advises Scott, and ask if you can have monitoring access to her account, where you can sign checks and pay bills. (You'd be responsible for the account and get the money at her death.) "It's worth talking to a financial advisor or an attorney about these and other options," Scott says.
- **Getting the key documents ready** "it's important to get a durable power of attorney for finances, a durable power of attorney for healthcare, and an advance health directive in place early because once your parent loses the ability to weigh in, **(continued on next page)**

you have to go to much more complex and expensive route of conservatorship, which requires a lawyer. You want your parents to weigh in. Having them make the decisions means you won't have to."

- **Educating yourself on the basics about their disease** "Knowing what's ahead allows you to prepare, and that eases anxieties," says Scott. Talk to other caregivers, either in old-fashioned support groups or in online virtual ones.
- **Building your support network** "If your brother lives 3,000 miles away, put him in charge of the finances. Find out who in the church will help. Get adult daycare services going so you get a break. Most people think they can't afford in-home care, but there are low-costs ways to go, from high school volunteers to senior-to-senior programs."
- **Considering assisted-living facilities** "People sometimes feel that they promised a parent they'd never put them into assisted living, but many of these facilities are great places to be. It's important to get on the list early because it can take awhile for an opening." (Caring.com's Senior Living Directory includes reviews of facilities at www.caring.com/local).

4 Helpful Resources

- **Area Agency on Aging** Every region in the United States offers counselors who are aware of local resources for the elderly. Go to www.aoa.gov and search for AAA finder to locate a counselor in your area. FREE
- **SHIP** The State Health Insurance Assistance Program provides help with questions about or problems with Medicare plans and policies. FREE
- **Geriatric-care manager** A GCM can do an in-home evaluation, help find an assisted-living facility, and take on other aspects of a parent's care. They're especially good in a crisis, when you live far away. Go to www.caremanager.org to find a GCM in your area. Expect to pay \$75 to \$250 an hour (Some government agencies and charities offer some GCM services on a sliding scale). VARIES
- **Elder companion** These are typically caring people who stay with your loved one while you run errands or take a break. You can find one through a home health agency or a local AAA or at www.caring.com/local/in-home-care. INEXPENSIVE