

# Caregivers Need Family Support

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When caring for an adult family member, the primary caregiver provides physical, psychological, financial, and other forms of assistance.

Caregiving may involve having the caregiver and the care-receiver living together, nearby, or hundreds of miles away. Whether providing round-the-clock direct care or coordinating others who are providing direct care, the caregiver is responsible to some degree for another person's well-being. No matter how loving the relationship, caregiving almost always involves some personal sacrifice and stress.

Families often have unrealistic expectations of the designated primary caregiver. They may expect the caregiver to juggle many hours filled with mental, emotional, physical, and financial stress without complaining or receiving help from other family members. This is often not because family members do not care, but because of poor communication or a lack of understanding about the amount of work involved in caregiving.

One way to help balance the load is to hold a family meeting to make sure everyone is involved in the planning and continued care of the care-receiver.

Ideally, such a meeting would be held before a crisis occurs so that a plan is in place. In this way, all family members have input into the plan before illness or accident places additional stress on relationships.

A successful family meeting gives everyone an opportunity to discuss personal concerns, identify potential problems and solutions, and form a caregiving plan.

## Suggestions for Family Meetings

- When possible, involve the care-receiver or provide an opportunity for her to express her own preferences.
- Notify family members who cannot attend to keep them informed of the decisions that are made.
- During the meeting, ask each family member to voice concerns. Try to make sure all concerns are addressed.
- Ask family members to list tasks they are willing to do.
- A person who is already serving as primary caregiver should list areas in which assistance is needed and ask for volunteers to help with these tasks.
- Prepare a written plan listing what each family member has agreed to do in order to prevent later disagreements.
- Hold periodic family meetings to evaluate how the plan is working. Family members should use this opportunity to voice concerns or seek help with assigned tasks. Decide if the plan is working or if changes need to be made.

Conflict can sometimes arise among caregivers who live near the care-receiver and those who live at a distance. If you see your relative only a few days out of the year, you may not understand all of the

issues. Those who live at a distance can help by making regular contact to find out what they can do and by offering to visit the care-receiver or pay for respite for the caregiver.

Families need to remember to keep communication open, allowing everyone involved to have a part in the decision-making process. Those who are not serving as primary caregivers should be aware that caregiving can be very stressful, and they should do as much as they can to help reduce the workload.