

This Is What Happened When My Parents Moved In

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When we built our home eleven years ago, my husband and I were committed to having my parents—then in their mid-seventies—come to live with us.

We built them an in-law apartment that is nearly 1,000 square feet, with a kitchen and laundry facilities. My parents were fully independent at the time, but my husband and I felt it was better to be prepared for their decline and avoid scrambling if a crisis arose.

I naively imagined that my folks would be unable to go anywhere or do much of anything on their own as they aged. I saw myself sitting next to their beds, helping them eat and giving them their medication. I thought I might hire women from the nearby Mennonite community to help me take care of their daily needs.

The reality was that they were quite independent for nearly a decade. They came and went on their own schedule, did their own shopping, went to doctor's appointments, ate out and even took short trips to visit family. Because we share an entrance to our laundry room, they would often pop their heads into my kitchen to say 'hello.' On Sundays, we would share a family meal, and my dad would mow our yard.

Eleven years have passed since my parents first moved in. The sudden death of my brother, who was just 50 years old, has sped up their aging process and brought on some depression, particularly in my father.

Although Dad jogged up until a couple of years ago, he no longer even takes walks. He spends hours—sometimes the entire day—in his recliner, watching TV or sleeping. Once adamant about not giving up his driver's license, my father rarely drives farther than three miles away, and only in the daytime when the weather is fair. My mom has become overwhelmed with taking care of his medications and doctor's visits, so I'm in charge of those tasks now. They rely on me more and more.

The Consequences of Living with Aging Parents

When my husband and I decided to move my parents in with us, I didn't consider that this would shut the door to our refuge.

Even with their own private quarters, my parents and I still share a common entrance, and I often need to run up to their apartment at odd hours of the day and night. Sometimes I'm on a call or busy working in my home office when there is a knock on my door because they need something. Just the other night it was after nine o'clock when I climbed the stairs to their apartment to fill Dad's pillbox for the week.

I relish a little break now and again, but that respite isn't always possible when those you care for live in your home. I know that when I need to relax and wind down, one or the other of my parents might need something, and I'll have to shift back into "caregiver mode."

This is the biggest adjustment I've had to make in my caregiving experience: my home is not my own, and it is certainly not my refuge, my safe space.

There are a few more things I didn't anticipate when we made this decision:

- Being an on-call cook. As my mom's health declined, it became harder for her to cook healthy, balanced meals. I knew they needed help, so I tried to share my leftovers or make extra portions to share with them. That wasn't enough. I felt guilty every day, knowing they weren't always eating right, but I was not ready to commit to cooking for them full time. Thankfully, I found a program through the local hospital that provides hot, nutritious and tasty meals for a nominal fee. My dad is still able to make the three-mile drive to the local senior center to pick up these meals. However, one day soon, that will no longer be the case (especially in the winter months), and we'll need to figure something else out.
- Taking on new care tasks. As my parents have gotten older, their coping mechanisms have decreased. Simple tasks are no longer easy. They get impatient and less tolerant with each other. My mom was the one who always managed my dad's medications and doctor's appointments, but it has become too overwhelming for her. These are now my tasks.
- Protecting against poor decisions. Older folks can often act like teenagers! I'm not talking about listening to loud music or partying. They increasingly make dangerous or unwise decisions due to diminishing cognitive skills. My mom has gone out on the most frigid winter days without a hat or gloves, and my dad will come down the stairs wearing shoes that aren't buckled!
- Catering to different needs. No two people age the same way. Their individual needs and capabilities (or lack thereof) are very different. My work as their caregiver is doubled because I have to treat each one differently. My mom is still sharp as a tack but lacks the physical strength and abilities she once had. My father, on the other hand, has more physical strength than Mom, but his cognitive skills have diminished.
- Pursuing "perfection." I never expected that I would often be my own worst enemy while providing care. I frequently put unrealistic expectations on myself, trying to be the 'perfect' daughter by meeting their every need. I have to be extremely intentional about maintaining a healthy balance. Even if I don't think I have the time, I've committed to taking yoga classes twice a week and seeing a counsellor to help me work through my challenges. Every caregiver needs "me" time.

- Becoming a Jane of all trades. Caregiving means I perform tasks like cutting their nails, trimming my dad's hair, buying their groceries, and washing their clothes. There is a lot of learning and multi-tasking involved!
- Going with the flow. Caregivers need to be able to change plans at the drop of a hat. For example, my husband and I decided it would be fun to throw a party for our 35th wedding anniversary, but unexpected complications from dad's minor surgery meant we had to cancel the celebration at the last minute. This turn of events reminded me of my days raising young children. When they got sick or had an accident, it didn't matter that you had something important planned. You just rolled with the punches.
- Acknowledging the need for support. I thought I'd be able to take care of my parents on my own, but that's unrealistic. Caring for two aging loved ones and maintaining a healthy and balanced personal life is not possible. Support eventually becomes necessary.
- Realizing the effects of stress. By virtue of being a caregiver, my life could be shortened by as much as eight years, according to a 30-year study conducted by The Ohio State University and the National Institute on Aging. The results were published in the Journal of Immunology and highlight the link between psychological stress and a weakened immune system. Mental and physical self-care is paramount for all caregivers.

The Hidden Benefits of Living with Aging Parents

While caring for two parents has been twice as exhausting, there's another (brighter) side to consider. Caregiving has afforded me the unexpected gift of connecting with my parents—especially my father—in a way I never could before. When it's just my dad and me going to his doctor's appointments or stopping for a bite to eat, we chat, joke or just share some comfortable silence. This would not have been possible if my parents hadn't moved in.

What's more, both of my parents tell me repeatedly how grateful they are for my help. My dad has even started calling me "angel." I am very much aware that these are memories in the making—experiences I will cherish long after they are gone.

*You viewed this article on the Caregivers Nova Scotia website www.CaregiversNS.org. For more information, contact us toll-free at 1.877.488.7338.