

Balanced LIVING



Planning the care of AGING PARENTS

If your parents are in their golden years, keep in mind that even gold can lose some of its glow with the inevitable effects of old age — and sooner or later, older loved ones will need assistance.

“It’s never too early to start planning for their future care,” says Virginia Morris, author of “How to Care for Aging Parents.” “Many children of aging parents wait until there’s a crisis, and then they’re left scrambling for mediocre options. Everyone — especially those who live far away from their parents and work full time — can benefit from being prepared and planning far ahead.”

Advance planning entails:

- Making sure legal documents have been drawn up, including an up-to-date will, a durable power of attorney, a living will and a health-care proxy.

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Dispelling myths ABOUT SOCIAL DRINKING

Enjoying wine, beer or spirits is a common activity in many social situations. Although alcohol can be viewed as a good way to relax and unwind, it’s important to note that behavioral influences play an important role in determining how much alcohol a person consumes and its subsequent effect on activities and emotions.

“Alcohol is a social lubricant,” explains G. Alan Marlatt, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Washington. “A person’s drinking behavior is motivated to a large extent by social anxieties and psychological expectations.”

To help gain an understanding of alcohol in social settings, Dr. Marlatt, who has conducted extensive research on social drinking, provides insight into some commonly held beliefs about alcohol consumption.

MYTH: A person who drinks will be more sociable than a person who doesn’t.

REALITY: Although a drink or two can help some people feel more relaxed, alcohol alone does not make a person more attractive, interesting or witty.

“People have strong beliefs about how alcohol changes behavior,” Dr. Marlatt says. “We’ve found that people’s beliefs about how they appear while drinking differ from the perceptions of others around them.”

Dr. Marlatt says, for example, that men may think they’re more attractive after having a few drinks. Yet when women are asked about these men, they don’t agree.

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PLANNING FOR AGING PARENTS

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- Researching the housing options and services available in your parents' community.
- Discussing with your loved ones how you can help with their future housing, financial and medical-care needs.
- Asking them about growing old, "What are their concerns, their worries, what's important to them, how can you help them?" Morris recommends.

"Don't parent your parent," she urges. "The point isn't to control your parents' life, but to help them maintain control. Your role is to give them as much autonomy and independence as possible."

When it's time to act

One day, all the signs may point to the need for you to actively step in to assist your parents. Telltale signs include:

- Your loved ones start losing weight.
- They stop washing their hair or clothing.
- They drink more alcohol.
- They leave piles of unpaid bills around.
- They let food grow moldy in the refrigerator.
- They start walking unsteadily.

Trust your instincts, Morris says.

“Anything that strikes you as ‘Hmmm, is this OK?’ probably isn’t OK.”

Important first steps

Identify your parents' doctors, if you haven't already, and ensure that you have the proper legal documents in place so you can coordinate with them on concerns.

Defining your limits

Many adult children find their first steps into caregiving responsibilities are like walking into quicksand. If you don't manage your time well or haven't planned in advance, you can become mired in never-ending obligations, such as daily chores and care, handling legal or financial issues or lining up health-care providers.

"You need to set limits," says Morris. "Establishing limits doesn't mean you don't love your parents or that you can't take good care of them. But you're not going to be any good to them if you're depressed, angry or sick — you have to take care of yourself."

To do this, Morris suggests you:

- **Decide what you can reasonably do to help, then stick with that plan.** If you decide you'll visit your mother twice per week, help her manage her finances and investigate local resources, then that's what you should do. Get help for other needs as they arise.
- **Accept help early on** — from relatives, friends, neighbors, religious organizations, senior centers or home-care agencies. "Set up a whole support network — don't be the only person doing this," says Morris.
- **Take care of yourself.** Get exercise, get enough sleep, pay attention to your diet, and get individual stress management and problem-solving support or attend group meetings for caregivers.

"People often push themselves until they become burnt out and angry at their siblings, and their work starts to suffer. I have seen several times where caregivers ended up in the hospital because they were so wiped out," says Morris. "This can be a consuming job — it's crucial to take care of yourself."

Continuum's EAP professionals can assist you in your self-care efforts, as well as provide information and referrals to community resources and access to legal forms.

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DRINKING MYTHS

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MYTH: People who drink can't help how they act.

REALITY: Alcohol can have physical and emotional effects, but Dr. Marlatt explains that a person's reactions to drinking are equally controlled by psychological perceptions.

In a study by Dr. Marlatt, young male drinkers were given drinks they thought contained alcohol, but, in fact, did not. As the subjects consumed the "alcoholic" drinks, their behavior changed dramatically, becoming more aggressive, loud and flirtatious.

"People have been conditioned to believe they'll react in certain ways if they consume alcohol," Dr. Marlatt said. "It's more about you and where you decide to put yourself that controls how you will act when drinking."

MYTH: People feel better if they drink.

REALITY: Although drinking provides a social and behavioral disinhibition which may be experienced as a stimulating effect, it has diminishing effects over time, including slow speech, reduced coordination and depression.

"People unrealistically think of alcohol as a magic elixir," Dr. Marlatt says. "They don't seem to remember the corresponding negative effects that go along with alcohol consumption, such as hangovers and depression."

STAYING IN CONTROL

Being a smart social drinker requires staying in control, setting limits and realizing how your perceptions and surroundings can affect your behavior.

If you're planning to attend an event where you don't know many people, determine beforehand how many drinks you will have. By drinking slowly and being aware of your surroundings, you can stay in control and not feel easily swayed into drinking more than you normally might.

"A good social drinker is knowledgeable about alcohol," Dr. Marlatt says. "You know your limits, you know to eat before you drink and you know that consuming alcohol is not going to change you into a better person."

If you, or your family member, is dealing with a substance abuse issue, Continuum EAP can help assess the situation and develop a plan for care.

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COPING WITH CHANGE in the workplace



Change evokes fear in most people because of the uncertainty it presents. People wonder: Will I be adequate for this new position? Will I be able to get along with my new boss? Will the corporation my company is merging with allow me to keep my job?

“Major changes, such as new management, downsizing or a company buyout, can result in a feeling of panic,” says Susan Starr, a human resource consultant and owner of H2O Marks, a Dallas-based marketing company.

Understanding change

When you have a routine, you know what to expect, and even if it’s difficult or boring, it’s consistent and reliable. You have learned how to do your work and deal with the people who work with you. But when something changes, suddenly your routine is broken and you no longer know what to expect.

Even if the change is for the better, the transformation can be difficult. For example, when one company installed a new phone system, a frustrated employee exclaimed, “I know it will be so much better once I get used to it, but right now the phones are driving me crazy.”

“It is the same with any kind of change,” says Starr. “There is a period of adjustment until you feel the consistency that builds trust and confidence. During this time, you may feel disoriented, frustrated, angry and powerless.”

The best time to prepare for any change is when things are running smoothly. That way, you’ll have time to plan ahead.

One way to do so is to practice the following four **A’s** of coping with change:

Awareness: Since uncertainty about the future creates the most fear and stress during a change, try to find as much information as you can about your situation. Whom can you ask? What can you learn? What research can you do? The more you learn, the less uncertainty you’ll experience. Behaviors, thoughts and

actions that can be learned and developed will help you cope with change.

Acceptance: You may not like the change, but if you accept the fact that it is the way it is, instead of fighting it or complaining about it, you’ll feel less frustrated.

“It’s important to accept transformations with grace and a sense of looking forward to a new experience,” says Starr.

Attitude: Are you being fearful or are you thinking about the possibilities for improvement change might bring? To focus on the positive aspects of your change, write a list of all the possible positive outcomes.

Even though minor changes can cause stress and frustration, the good news is that any change can be an opportunity for something positive to happen. What’s more, when you learn how to cope effectively with minor changes at work, you’ll develop the skills and positive outlook necessary to help you deal with a major change.

Action: This is where you do have some control over the situation. It’s how you prepare and respond to change.

The following positive actions can help you cope.

- **Develop a network.** Always keep in contact with your managers and fellow employees from former jobs. Your network will be a valuable source of support in times of change.
- **Learn new skills.** Learn a new computer program. Take a class in communication skills. Learn to make presentations. Ongoing training will add skills to your professional tool kit.
- **Change your surroundings.** Do what you can to make your work area pleasant and comfortable.
- **Ask action questions.** Whom can you talk to if a situation is getting more difficult to cope with? How can you get to know a new boss or co-worker? What ideas can you present to your company that will help with the change?

“The key to coping with change is resilience,” Starr said.

“Resilience means knowing how to survive and making the best of change in spite of setbacks, barriers or limited resources.”