

## Adjusting to Living With Elderly Parents

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Taking care of an elderly parent in your home is a huge commitment. It can strengthen family bonds and improve caregiving logistics, but it may not always work out as everyone had hoped.

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Read one couple's caregiving story, and discover how to deal with elderly parents living with you — with expert advice on moving forward when it just isn't working out.

### **From a retirement community to her daughter's home: Mildred's story**

Lynette and Marty Whiteman were getting used to losing sleep.

After Lynette's aging mother Mildred moved into their New Jersey home from her retirement community, she regularly woke the couple, asking for help at odd hours. To Mildred, the requests were urgent, but Marty didn't see changing light bulbs or resetting microwave clocks as tasks to crawl out of bed for.

Mildred's increasing care needs — and midnight knocks on the couple's door — were taking a toll on the Whitemans' marriage. Tension over caregiving roles steadily increased, while privacy decreased. Communication broke down, and stress piled up.

The Whitemans, like many adults who choose to care for aging parents, thought having Mildred in the home would not only keep her safe but lend convenience as well. They thought it would be easier than having to travel back and forth between their home and hers. As it turned out, that wasn't the case. "It was a great idea in concept," says Lynette. "But we didn't know what we were getting into."

### **Living with elderly parents seemed like a good idea**

Caring for Mildred at home wasn't urgent, but it seemed like a good idea to Lynette. Her mom would receive regular social interaction, and they could form a closer relationship together.

Before moving in with her daughter, Mildred had grown depressed and isolated. Her late husband — Lynette's father — had been outgoing, and he kept the couple engaged in community life and social events. Without him around, Lynette was worried: What if Mildred became too lonely? What if she fell while she was alone?

"We figured she'd have somebody if something happened in the middle of the night, and we could help her with her bills," says Lynette.

So, they built a small, attached apartment with a private kitchen and bathroom using some of Mildred's savings. But the adjustment was more difficult than expected.

### **Adjusting to aging parents moving in with you**

At first, Marty and Lynette had trouble accepting the constant late-night interruptions and repetitive dinners at home. It seemed like they'd put their lives — and their marriage — on hold to care for Mildred. However, the couple's situation improved after they agreed to work as a team, make adjustments, and follow a few pieces of caregiver advice:

1. **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** Even short breaks can prevent caregiver burnout. Marty and Lynette eventually hired a home care aide to come once a week to help Mildred shower, a decision that eliminated what was once a daunting task.
2. **Make time for everyone, including yourself.** Try scheduling regular activities with your aging parent, dates with your partner, and alone time to recharge. "We put her meds out for her, made dinner, and watched *Jeopardy* with her every night," says Lynette. "But after a while, we started getting out on our own, as well."
3. **Accept that some things don't change.** Lynette had to finally face the fact that she could never transform her mother, who continued to isolate herself at home, into a happy person. She could only make sure her mom was taken care of and safe.
4. **Set boundaries.** When you're taking care of an elderly parent in your home, they aren't a guest. You can share rules and guidelines with them as members of the family and household. For example, it was good for Mildred to wake up her daughter with medical concerns or emergencies, but resetting clocks could wait until morning. However, this guideline may not work for caregivers of loved ones with dementia or cognitive decline.
5. **Acknowledge that you're doing your best in a tough situation.** Living with elderly parents can be difficult, so remain aware that you're doing what you can to help your loved one — even if it feels thankless sometimes.

#### **Aging parents moving in with you: When expectations don't align with reality**

"Moving someone into your home is an enormous commitment," says Jennifer FitzPatrick, a gerontology professor and author of "Cruising Through Caregiving: Reducing the Stress of Caring for Your Loved One."

Many families think that living with elderly parents will simplify caregiving. They believe it may be less expensive than senior living and easier than visiting an aging relative in a senior living community. But sometimes these expectations don't fit the reality of being a family caregiver, and the arrangement becomes strained.

If you take care of an elderly parent in your home, asking yourself the following questions can help you improve and evaluate your situation to make it better for everyone involved.

1. **How much care does your aging loved one need?** Maybe you're comfortable cooking and doing laundry but are not as comfortable bathing your parent or helping them use the bathroom. If you're not able to provide such care, it may be time for home care or assisted living.
2. **Is the relationship mutually beneficial?** Sometimes, a parent needs help but can also contribute to the household by cooking meals or helping grandkids with homework, says FitzPatrick. Consider that living with your elderly parent as a sandwich generation caregiver may only be possible when they can pitch in or provide some extra help.
3. **How is family caregiving affecting your marriage? Your children?** Up to 80% of people caring for an elderly parent or relative report increased strain on their romantic partnerships, according to a study of 300 spouses of family caregivers. After their adult sons moved out, Marty and Lynette grew accustomed to their newfound privacy and spontaneity. However, when Lynette's mom moved in, privacy almost totally disappeared. "We fought more than we had in a really long time," says Lynette. "It complicated everything."
4. **Are you experiencing caregiver burnout?** Taking care of elderly parents can lead to significant caregiver health risks. If being a family caregiver is severely affecting your mental and physical health and overall well-being, it's time to take a step back. This could mean enlisting other family members, arranging respite care, or considering a new living situation.

### **When living with elderly parents isn't working out**

Like Lynette and Marty, it's possible to turn a difficult situation with an aging parent into a successful living arrangement. However, this doesn't work for everyone. Sometimes, the caregiving burden becomes too much, or the aging relative's health and happiness are at risk.

"If living with elderly parents isn't working out, chances are they feel the same way," says FitzPatrick, who recommends having an honest talk with your aging loved one.

1. **Ask your parent how they feel about the arrangement.** "Don't assume your parent will be heartbroken that you don't think it's going well," says FitzPatrick. "Starting the discussion and asking their opinion shows respect."
2. **Address challenges of living with elderly parents.** Include the difficulties they may be facing, as well. You might focus on the lack of privacy that everyone — including your parent — is experiencing. Then discuss and work as a team to find a solution.
3. **Prepare yourself psychologically.** If your aging parent has a history of being temperamental, confrontational, or overly dependent, seek support from a counselor, geriatric care manager, or friend.
4. **Don't feel guilty.** Deciding against living with elderly parents doesn't mean that you love them any less, or that you're avoiding your responsibilities, says FitzPatrick.
5. **Help them find a new living situation.** If you're no longer able to provide care, a new, better fitting home for your parent can benefit everyone involved. In this case, giving your support throughout the move can be a great way to continue providing care for your parent.

Source:

<https://www.aplaceformom.com/caregiver-resources/articles/living-with-your-aging-parent-doesnt-work>