

Taking Care!

One Size Doesn't Fit All Caregivers!

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Much is written about caring for aging relatives, offering general advice and specific tips to family caregivers. Some information and ideas may resonate and be more helpful than others. That's because, although caregivers face many similar challenges, no two caregiving situations are alike.



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Read on for numerous factors that account for differences among caregivers' experiences.

Interpersonal Issues: The nature and history of the caregiver's relationship with their relative plays a key role in how caregiving unfolds. If personalities, habits or values clash, the caregiver is likely to experience more stress than average.

Caregiver's Health: If they have physical or mental health challenges, caregiving is likely to be more difficult. Even if their health is initially good, this may change over time.

Timing: Caring for an older relative can be especially challenging when the caregiver is looking after multiple adults, raising a family or employed. If more than one of these applies, caregiver stress is further multiplied.

Care Receiver's Needs: The more physical or mental limitations a care receiver has, the more time, energy and skills are required to meet their needs. Caring for someone with dementia, for instance, may be mentally exhausting, because of the affected person's poor short-term memory and impaired judgment, resulting not only in repetitive questioning and other behaviors, but also the need for continuous supervision.

Caregiver stress tends to be higher when the care receiver has a degenerative disease involving changes and losses that necessitate ongoing adjustments, including increased – and perhaps more skilled – assistance. Stress can also be higher when the relative has multiple major medical conditions – for example, Alzheimer's disease and cancer.

Available Supports: Caregiving isn't meant to be a one-person job, but in some cases, the primary caregiver may be doing it all. This puts them at higher risk for burnout. Ideally, other family members pitch

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in and regularly give the caregiver a break; however, this doesn't always happen, depending on whether other family members live locally and are able and willing to share the care. Community resources can also go a long way to supplement a caregiver's efforts, but their availability varies from one community to the next.

Finances: Personal financial resources of the caregiver and care receiver affect the quality of life not only of the care receiver but also the caregiver. If, separately or together, they can afford the cost of home renovations, medical equipment and private healthcare services as needed, this is likely to make caregiving safer and less stressful.

Expectations: Care receivers vary in their expectations regarding caregiver availability, outside help (whether or not they'll accept it) and financial arrangements (who pays for what), among other things.

Cultural factors may also play a role. For example, in some cultures it's expected that elders will be cared for in the home of one of their children until their death. Such an expectation can place undue pressure on a caregiver who feels stretched beyond their limits.

Sometimes, too, a caregiver can be their own worst enemy, expecting too much of themselves – due to perfectionism, for example.

Parting Thoughts

If you're a caregiver, try not to compare yourself with others in this role. Their circumstances are likely to be different, although perhaps not apparent from where you sit.

When you come across caregiving advice, know that it won't always be applicable because, in some ways, your situation is unique. Take what you can use and leave the rest, without any guilt.

In the end, you need to do what feels right and works for you. Because the best caregiver is a healthy caregiver – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Lisa M. Petsche is a social worker and freelance writer specializing in boomer and senior health matters. She has extensive personal experience with elder care.

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