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## Green Is Better

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## Thou Shalt Honor...

ASSISTING AGING PARENTS

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY



It began with: “In sickness and in health....” It has been a promise, a commitment, and a way of life—a very personal part of couple relationships, as we care for one another in the marriage years.

Couples often believe the responsibility to care for each other is theirs alone. Older couples are generally reluctant to acknowledge that at some point one needs more care than the other can provide, or they may not be aware of it.

Many couples are capable of looking after one another, but as the years go by a time comes when changes must be addressed. Consider these ideas if you face these transitions for older couples in your life.

Remember to respect the relationships of older couples who understand each other’s needs and desires best, even though it may not seem apparent to you. Older parents can change, but they need to do it on their own terms and their own timetable. Even if you share a close relationship with your parents, they may not want you to know personal and financial details. They are entitled to as much privacy as possible.

Mark Edinberg, a gerontologist, believes that when adult children parent their parents, they experience subconscious feelings of sadness and frustration as they realize their parents are no longer the important figures of their childhood. This leads to a role reversal.

It’s important to focus on the present, assess the situation, and identify the parent’s current needs, from a true caregiver’s perspective rather than the adult child. The caregiving parent needs time to grieve as they confront their and their partner’s mortality, and also changes in their daily lives,

dreams unfinished, and trips not taken as they cling to their care-giving roles of their marital vows.

Older caregivers are often overwhelmed by their responsibilities, especially if their own physical stamina and psychological resilience have declined. Stress-related hormone levels tend to be significantly higher in older people who care for their spouses. Older caregivers are also at higher risk for depression, which may be manifest not as profound sadness, but unusual irritability or anxiety. Older spousal caregivers have a higher death rate than non-caregivers. So what is a concerned family member to do?

Recognize opportunities to step in, gently. Even when older couples refuse assistance, they may be more open to assistance when consistently approached in a respectful way.

Determine that frustration will not drive you away. Acknowledge your parent’s commitment and adaptability, and verbally recognize their accomplishments. Even when you don’t agree with some decisions, let the parent caregiver make decisions as long as they can, especially if decisions aren’t about serious health or safety hazards.

Look for little things you can do, such as making a favorite dish, rather than taking charge of the checkbook. Once parents realize their children are just trying to make their lives easier, it’s more comfortable for them to ask you to do more.

When it is time to intervene more directly, there are many supports. Contact your local Area Agency on Aging, or other community supports, books, and websites, including [www.thoushalthonor.org](http://www.thoushalthonor.org).

Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and a licensed marriage and family therapist.

