

## Successful Aging

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### Finding Help for Caregivers

by Eileen Beal

When you hear the phrase “caregiver,” do you think of a white-clad home care aide? Or do you get a mental picture of yourself grocery shopping for your widowed mother, or taking your never-married uncle to the doctor, or helping the elderly couple next door put up their storm windows for the winter?

Most of us probably “see” the white-clad aide as a caregiver and what we do for older family members and neighbors as “just helping out.” However, when you are “just” helping mom, your uncle and the neighbors with activities of daily living – shopping, getting to doctors’ appointments, home maintenance, etc. – that enable them to remain at home and retain their independence, you *too* are a caregiver.

And, says Marcia Karchmer, a social worker and counselor with Benjamin Rose Institute, when you are providing significant practical assistance – coordinating medical appointments and care, scheduling outings, providing financial support – you aren’t just *a* caregiver, you are a *primary* caregiver. “That,” explains Karchmer, “is someone – a spouse, a family member, a neighbor – who is providing comprehensive assistance to make sure [people] get the care they need.”

### A New Role

Acknowledging that you are the primary caregiver is difficult adds Karchmer. “It’s a role reversal for the adult child...[and] for the spouse it can mean the loss of a significant relationship. It can be very conflicting and stressful.”

It’s also difficult because acknowledging that you are a caregiver – whether you are providing care in a loved one’s apartment, your home or from 500 miles away – means you need information about community resources, services, programs, supports and strategies that can help you manage the increased responsibilities, demands and challenges that come with caregiving. You also need insight and advice on how to assume the caregiver role without neglecting yourself, your family and your job. “Caregivers who don’t seek help – who try to do everything on their own – can have very high stress levels,” warns Karchmer.

### Tap into Support Services

Dealing with the added responsibilities, anxiety and stress that come with the caregiver role can be difficult. Fortunately, there are a wide array of in-home and caregiver support services available in

Northeast Ohio. Some are free or provided for a small fee; some are provided on a sliding fee basis; some are pay-as-you-go programs.

But you can't tap into services until you know what kinds of services you need. You also need to know where and how to access them.

The fastest way to pull that information together is to hire a geriatric social worker, case manager or care manager. That's easiest done by contacting local social service agencies, such as Catholic Social Services (216.631.3655), Jewish Family Services (216.292.3999) or the Benjamin Rose Institute (216.791.8000); the National Association of Geriatric Care Managers ([www.caremanager.org](http://www.caremanager.org)); and/or local home care agencies, such as Hansen Services (877.315.4357) or Age Line (216.941.9990).

Social workers and care managers have the training, skills, experience and community contacts to assess and address both the caregiver's and the older person's concerns and needs. Often, says Karchmer, all that's needed "to sort things out" is one or two meetings during which the "expert" gives the caregiver (and in many cases the care recipient) the insights, tools and skills needed to find and work successfully with public and private agencies that provide services and programs for older adults. In addition, he or she helps lower caregiver (and care recipient) feelings of stress, strain and burden.

Hiring a geriatric social worker or care/case manager is probably the easiest way to tap into the wide array of resources available locally. However, it's not the only way to find help, information and support, says Karchmer.

Do-it-yourselfers can:

- Call or visit their municipal Office on Aging and/or senior center.
- Visit their local library for help. "Resource librarians are *very* helpful," says Karchmer.
- Contact United Way's First Call for Help (dial 211/[www.211Cleveland.org](http://www.211Cleveland.org)).
- Get information about medical conditions from local organizations, such as the Alzheimer's Association (216.721.8457/[www.alzclv.org](http://www.alzclv.org)), American Cancer Society (888.227.6446/[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)), or Diabetes Foundation (216.591.0800/[www.dagc.org](http://www.dagc.org)).
- Order a copy of *The Older Adults Resource Guide* from the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging (216.621.8010). The free guide provides information – phone numbers, web addresses, etc. – for services, programs, organizations and resources in Cuyahoga, Geauga,

Lake, Lorain and Medina Counties. It also provides information on medical, legal and financial issues impacting the well-being of older adults.

When you become a caregiver, knowledge isn't just power, it's the key to successful caregiving. And knowing where to get that knowledge – information, resources, support services – will make it easier to meet not only a loved one's needs, but also your own.

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*Eileen Beal, MA, is a health care writer specializing in issues related to aging and caregiving. This Successful Aging column sponsored by the Benjamin Rose Institute was published in the Sun Newspapers in November 2008.*