

The Four Stages of Caregiving

According to a model developed by Martha Grove Hipskind, a researcher with the Health Planning Source, and Denise M. Brown, the editor and publisher of *Caregiving*, a newsletter for caregivers, there are four stages of caregiving that all caregivers go through to some degree or another. Look for yourself in these stages: Where are you now? What are the best things to do for yourself and your care recipient now? Where will you be? What can you expect now and in the future?

STAGE I: ANTICIPATORY CAREGIVER

In this category, you see the possibility of becoming a caregiver within the next 12 to 18 months. You watch as an elderly relative's health begins to fail, and you know that you will become at least one of the caregivers.

The best thing you can do for yourself and your care recipient at this stage is to gather information. Find out about his or her financial status, health status and any important legal documents. Also spend time in this stage researching information about community services, health programs and safety-proofing the home.

STAGE IV: CAREGIVER IN LOSS

In this, the final stage, you have come to an end of the cycle of caregiving as you have known it; perhaps you have put your care recipient in a nursing home, or perhaps he or she has died. You will be experiencing grief in your loss, both of the care recipient and of your own role as caregiver. Nonetheless, your life must go forward.

Care for yourself now. See a counselor, join a support group, honor and remember your care recipient and reflect on yourself and your life. This period of grief is completely natural, and it is also a natural progression from the many months or years that you have been a caregiver.

STAGE II: FRESHMAN CAREGIVER

As a Freshman Caregiver, you will have been a caregiver for only about 6 to 18 months. In this stage you will most likely be realizing the immensity of the caregiving tasks that you face now and in the future, and you will begin looking to others for assistance.

As with Stage I, one of the best things that you can do at this stage is to research what kind of help you will be able to find. Will you be able to hire help? What kind of help is typically needed for someone with this particular illness or situation? Be sure to involve the care recipient in decisions regarding his or her care, and also communicate clearly and regularly with other family members.

STAGE III: ENTRENCHED CAREGIVER

At this stage, you have been giving care for a long time, and you may be exhausted. You might be so tired that you are compromising the care you're giving—and you may also not be taking adequate care of yourself or your own immediate family. Because you may feel guilty about your anger and even your exhaustion, you tend to suppress your emotions.

Find alternatives to being the primary caregiver—perhaps day care or other respite care is a viable option. Make sure that you take good care of yourself as well: eat right, exercise and explore therapy options to get yourself back on track.

