

Supporting Male Care Partners in our Communities

Care Partner Tool Kit

Caregiving, in and of Itself, Is Challenging

Family caregivers/care partners face a range of obstacles and trials while taking on the responsibilities of caregiving. Many feel that they had little choice in the matter, they may become overwhelmed with the financial, medical, and personal care needs of their loved ones, and they are much more likely to suffer from personal health issues, depression, anxiety, and loneliness. The bottom line is that caregiving can be an overwhelming task for almost anyone.

The Recent (and Continuing) Increase in Male Care Partners

Over the years, as families have gotten smaller and adult children (and their parents) became more likely to relocate to other parts of the country (or abroad), caregiving, which had been historically seen as a "female role," is now often filled by fathers, husbands, and sons. Today about 40% of family care partners are male... that number is up 20% over the last eight years, and it is expected to rise. This shift has put an increasing number of males into positions for which they may not be well-prepared. That number is expected to grow as the Baby Boomers, the largest generation in US history, ages deeper into their senior years (the youngest Boomers will turn 60 soon, while the oldest Boomers are in their late 70s now). While many of these Boomers will need care, a large number of them will need to take on the role of a care partner.

Some Fundamental Differences Generally Experienced by Male and Female Care Partners

Caregiving has been, and to a certain extent, continues to be, considered a responsibility for females. Women, in general, start out with less of a financial base when entering a caregiving relationship, which adds to overall stress levels. Studies show (Impett et al., 2006) that women are less likely than men to put their own interests or needs above those of their partners and as a result, are more dedicated to emotionally and physically caring for them. Receiving help from others may also be experienced differently... male care partners may feel more relieved when others provide care whereas female care partners may feel a loss of autonomy and significant guilt in their care partner role. Male caregiving, however, has its own serious and fundamental challenges.

Special Challenges Facing Male Care Partners

It is important to appreciate, and address, the special challenges that male care partners face. With a little insight, and some guidance, men can approach caregiving with confidence, empathy, and compassion. Here are some of the reasons why men may start out at a disadvantage:

- **Men often enter caregiving with less practical experience than women**
Because of societal "norms," especially for older men, home-based caregiving for children was something mostly done (if not entirely) by women. That inequality gave means women learned to self-sacrifice for the good of others, do basic caregiving tasks (such as bathing, cooking,

feeding, etc.), and more readily step into the role of a care partner.

- **Men are less likely to ask for help**

Women are much more likely to reach out to others when at their breaking point, not seeing it as a failure, but a necessity. The reality is that caregiving success requires a team, and building a good team is essential.

- **Men are more likely to want to project the appearance that "all is well"**

The fear of failure often leads men to portray situations as "fine" when the truth is that things are not going well at all. Caregiving, by definition, is only required when things are amiss... if "all is well" there wouldn't be a need for caregiving. Let those around you know the truth about what you and your loved one are going through.

- **Men may be less comfortable with more intimate levels of care**

Women are much more likely to have provided intimate care for children or other family members and be less uneasy about providing or receiving this kind of care. Caregiving, depending on the reason and situation, can often become very personal and intimate... a situation that can often make men uncomfortable.

- **Many men get frustrated when they are unable to "control" an uncontrollable situation**

Caregiving is a job where the tasks change, the situation can be volatile, and the results are not guaranteed... most males prefer environments where they can "control" things to their satisfaction. The best care partner, doing everything right, will often be overwhelmed and feel that things are slipping out of control.

- **Men are more likely to approach a challenging situation by assessing solutions and completing tasks**

This one is a blessing and a curse. Here's a practical example: A male care partner (adult son) sees that the loved one that he is caring for (his mother) is at risk of falling because of mobility issues. He approaches with a "solution/task" focus, and decides to clear out clutter in the home, remove throw rugs, and rearrange the furniture so that movement is easier and less dangerous. He is pleased with the result and shows his loved one... who doesn't offer thanks but complains that she liked where things were and misses the things that were removed. The "solution/task" male is now angry that his efforts are not being appreciated. Where did things go wrong? The son focused on solving the problem but didn't anticipate his mother's emotional reaction to her house being rearranged. Tasks and solutions are great... but don't forget that a large portion of being a care partner exists in a more sensitive and emotional world. Many men find success through caregiving that incorporates a combination of management and nurturing skills (Russell, 2007).

- **Men, while focusing on tasks, can often experience "tunnel-vision"**

When working on an important challenge, men will often focus so much on the task at hand that they lose sight of the affect their actions may be having on others. In caregiving, this usually means that sometimes men fail to realize the impact of their caregiving on those around them... especially close family members. If you are taking on a care partner role, it is likely that your spouse/partner and/or close family members will be impacted as well. It is best to talk with them before the caregiving starts to explain what you are doing, what you expect them to do (if anything), and what might be their concerns. It is also important to continue to check in with loved ones on a regular basis to let them know how you are doing and find out how they are doing.

- Men are much less likely to attend caregiver support groups**
 A number of years ago, it would have been the exception to see a man at a care partner support group, and that was unfortunate... support groups have helped so many people navigate the challenging world of caregiving. More recently, more men have been attending meetings... that is due to the increasing number of males providing care, and a greater willingness on the part of men to be involved in support groups overall. Male care partners need to be able to let others know about how they are feeling... the good, the bad, and the ugly. As in all challenging situations, waiting until you've reached a crisis point (or even after it) to seek help is dangerous and foolish. Please find a support group in your area (and/or online) and participate with all you've got.
- Men can see the decline of a loved one as a sign that they have failed at their job as a care partner**
 Generally, there are two types of care partner situations... your loved one will recover from whatever it is that they are experiencing... or they won't. Men tend to be "results-oriented," and decline and death are not results that they look for, but those results are often inevitable. Men were more likely to report a worse-than-expected caregiving experience at the end of life of the person they were caring for (Burns et al., 2015). Caring for someone who is terminal is a special experience... a gut-wrenching and emotionally draining experience... but it is not a "failure." Being alongside someone to the end of their lives is a sacred task and may be without match in our human experience.

Six Things that Every Male Care Partner Needs to Know

1) You are not alone

Approximately 40% of care partners are men, and the number is increasing. There is someone out there who is experiencing something like what you are, and your stories should be shared with others. Find, and attend a support group near you. If you don't like the first one, find another one.

2) You are almost certainly going to be forced out of your comfort zone

You won't be able to control most of what's happening, and you will probably be required to do things that make you uncomfortable. If you are open, you will learn about flexibility, compassion, and release. You will find out that you are capable of things that you didn't think you could do.

3) You need to reach out and create a support team

You wouldn't be able to win a baseball or football game by yourself. Caregiving is often portrayed as a solo effort, but the very best outcomes result from a team effort. Care teams include family members, neighbors, friends, church members, co-workers, and anyone else who might be able to contribute to the process. Build a great team for your loved one.

4) A "logical" solution may not be the answer to an "emotional" situation

There's a very good chance that you want to spend most (or all) of your time in "logical land," but you will be forced into "emotional village" for a good portion of your care partner responsibilities. If you can't "play well" during the emotional times, learn to let things pass, express your feelings and concerns at a support group, and/or seek professional/spiritual support.

5) You need to be aware of the toll that stress may be taking on you

If you are the primary care partner, your overall health is essential... you cannot care for your loved one if you yourself require care. Stress is the silent monster here, and being conscious of its level, and its dangers, will help you to make the right decisions for everyone involved (that often means reaching out to others for help).

6) You need to share the complicated feelings that you may be experiencing

And it is most likely going to get even more complicated. Make sure that you have someone to talk with about what you are going through. Caregiver support groups, once again, are a great place to find others who understand what you may be experiencing and will be there to listen to your thoughts and concerns with empathy and without judgement.

Summary

More and more men are serving their loved ones in care partner roles. Because of the traditional male-female societal roles, males face specific challenges that can make caregiving more difficult. A desire to "control" things, resistance to asking for help, and submerging one's feelings can undermine the best efforts and interests of a male care partner. Caregiving is a team sport, and it is up to the primary care partner to build the strongest team for the best outcome. Care Partner support groups are an excellent way to find the information and support you will need on this journey. Caregiving, while one of the most challenging things that a person can take on is rewarding. You can, and should, be very proud of what you are doing.

Additional Information for Care Partners

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) - Family Caregiver Guides

(<https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/resource-guides>)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - Supporting Caregivers: An Emerging Public Health Issue

(<https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/supporting-caregivers.htm>)

How to find the Right Caregiver Support Group - In-person or online, communities can offer valuable help

The Rosalynn Carter Center for Caregivers

(<https://www.rosalynncarter.org/>)

This Quicksheet is part of the [Care Partner Tool Kit](#) where you can find additional Quicksheets on other Care Partner topics and a Resource Roadmap with websites and books. For additional resources see the resource library page for the partners in this project [POAMN \(www.poamn.org\)](http://www.poamn.org) and [APCE \(www.apcenet.org\)](http://www.apcenet.org) or the [Office of Christian Formation \(www.pcusa.org/formation\)](http://www.pcusa.org/formation)

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