

When you're starting out as a family caregiver, it's hard to know where to begin.

You might have recently realized that a loved one needs assistance, and is no longer as self-sufficient as he or she once was. Or there may have been a sudden change in a loved one's health. Now it's time to take action, and consider the people, services and information that will help you care for your loved one. The earlier you find support, the better.

1 Start with a diagnosis.

If you've noticed changes in your loved one's abilities – either physically or cognitively – speak with their medical team. You can start with their primary care physician, who might refer you to a specialist such as a neurologist for a more specific diagnosis. A thorough evaluation will rule out any reversible causes of the changes you've observed. For example, dementia like symptoms can be caused by depression, nutritional deficiencies, reaction to medications or an infection. A diagnosis will also help you better understand what is happening and knowing your loved one's condition can help you plan ahead realistically. Learn as much as you can about your family member's diagnosis. This information will confirm that you are not imagining things or exaggerating your loved one's behavior or needs. Especially when you're dealing with dementia, learning about the diagnosis will help you keep in mind that it's the disease that is causing your loved one to gradually lose control over his or her behavior. Many books, videos and classes are available to inform you about what you can expect as your loved one's disease progresses.

2 Talk with your loved one about his or her finances and health care wishes.

If your relative is able to complete a Durable Power of Attorney for finances and health care, assist them in meeting with an elder law specialist to create these documents. This planning can help relieve your immediate anxiety and make you better prepared for the future. This is the best way to honor your loved one's 2 wishes, even when they can no longer communicate them. It can also start important discussions with your family members. If your loved one doesn't have the capacity to execute these documents, you will need further legal advice to learn about your options.

First Steps for New Caregivers

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At this stage, consider inviting family and close friends to come together and discuss your loved one's care.

If possible, your loved one should be included in the meeting. Discuss your loved one's diagnosis and what this means. List the tasks that are needed so they can be more easily divided up. Let everyone discuss their concerns, as well as how much and what kind of help each person can offer. As the primary caregiver, it's best for you to focus on accepting what assistance your friends and family are offering, even if it's not exactly what you had in mind. For more information contact Caregiver Resource Center OC for our Fact Sheet called "Holding a Family Meeting".

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Take advantage of community resources such as meal programs and adult day care programs. These resources are available so that you don't have to do everything yourself and to give you a break. It is important to explore support that may be available to you, both in your community and through public benefits. You can also see if there are caregiver classes and workshops offered in your community by calling the Caregiver Resource Center OC. These education programs will help you feel more confident and make the time you spend caregiving easier for both you and your loved one.

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After all of this planning, don't forget what's most important: finding support for yourself.

Caregivers often feel isolated as they take on more responsibility, and as their social lives move into the background. A caregiver's health can also be impacted by the needs of their loved one. A support group is a good place to meet other family caregivers who have really "been there". You can attend support groups in your community or online.

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