

## March Senior Sense: Caring for a parent who couldn't care for you

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There's a common response you often hear when you tell people that you are caring for an aging parent. "What an honor it is to care for someone who cared for you." And for many that's true. But the fact is, there are plenty of caregivers out there who are caring for a parent who couldn't care for them. Maybe that parent was mentally or physically ill, absent, or even abusive. What is caregiving like for those adult children?

Eldercare is difficult for many reasons. It disrupts your life, and often comes with no warning. There are very few social supports from which to get assistance. Older parents, unlike the children you may have raised or are raising, have opinions and habits and relationships that can make helping them difficult. And, it is incredibly intimate to take care of someone when they are vulnerable and in need. As reciprocity or an act of duty, you call on familial love to get you through – even, and perhaps especially, during the times when you don't even think you like the person you are caring for. As an obligation, financial decision, or only-option, where do you find the strength and the "why" to care?

There are three strategies that successful caregivers deploy when they are caring for a parent who couldn't care for them: choose, protect and identify.

### Choose

Caregiving is a choice. It may not be an easy choice. It may feel like a false choice. But ultimately it is a choice. While this can be a difficult concept for many caregivers to accept - You think I would choose to sacrifice my career, time with my kids, my sleep, my personal time, for this? – people who care for a parent who couldn't care for them actively make the choice to get involved in their parents' life. This benefits them because, according to an AARP report titled, "Caregiving in the U.S.," caregivers who feel more in control and accepting of their roles are more likely to realize positive benefits from caregiving.

### Protect

Caregiving, even under the best circumstances, can bring up old hurts and wounds from childhood. This is especially true for adult children whose parents did not care for or protect them as children. That's why boundaries are so important for them; they must protect themselves from negative feelings and emotions that threaten to open old wounds. Set those boundaries by being acutely aware of what behaviors you are and are not willing to tolerate. Identify what triggers your emotions and put supports in place to care for yourself when you need it. Perhaps that means hiring a paid caregiver to assist with some tasks, or seeking respite care every few months.

### Identify

Successful caregivers identify why they choose to care for a parent who didn't care for them. As caregivers who have a choice in what they do or do not do for someone else, they find their own meaning and reward in the work. Finding meaning and personal satisfaction in caregiving is the best way to combat caregiver burnout and stress – no matter the circumstances.

Liz O'Donnell is the founder of [Working Daughter](#) and the author of [Working Daughter: A Guide To Caring For your Aging Parents While Making A Living](#). For caregiving support, information and resources contact a Senior Care Advisor at Care.com. We are master's-level social workers specializing in adult and senior care. Call us today at (855) 781-1303 x3 or email questions to [careplanning@care.com](mailto:careplanning@care.com)

