

**The career of caregiving**  
**The seven stages**  
by Clif Barber

The experience of caring for older family members follows a series of markers in much the same way that a career choice follows a series of stages. In their quest for services, caregivers might find it helpful to recognize where they are in their caregiving career as well as to understand their individual support needs. Research has found seven typical stages or markers of caregiving. While these markers tend to follow a sequence, the experience, duration and order vary according to the circumstances of the caregiver.

At any given marker, some caregivers will simply need information. Others will need emotional support and still others will need assistance with direct-care tasks or with decision-making about appropriate care. As with a vocational career, caring for a loved one can be satisfying and rewarding if the caregiver chooses and adjusts the caregiving role according to his or her own circumstances, needs and capabilities.

**Marker 1: Performing caregiving tasks**

The first marker of your caregiving career is when you begin to help an older family member (parent or spouse) with routine activities, such as banking and money matters, shopping and transportation.

**Marker 2: Self-definition as a caregiver**

You'll arrive at marker no. 2 when you begin to incorporate caregiving tasks into your personal identity. This typically happens when there is a shift in the nature of the relationship between caregiver and care recipient. An adult child might experience a dramatic shift in roles, for example, when a parent needs help with meal preparation or sorting out medications. A caregiving spouse, who has long provided routine services as part of the spousal role, might not recognize their role as caregiver until much later.

**Marker 3: Performing personal care**

Marker no. 3 is characterized by assistance with personal hygiene. For caregivers who are adult children, this marker is often a turning point. The physical contact involved at this level might be so awkward and uncomfortable for both the parent and the child that it makes sense to enlist professional help to provide personal care.

For spouses, the need to provide assistance with personal care is a graphic reminder that the relationship with the care recipient has changed in a significant way. This might be the point where a spouse actually realizes his or her role as

caregiver, and in this case, markers two and three could be experienced almost simultaneously.

#### **Marker 4: Seeking assistance**

The caregiver reaches marker no. 4 when she actively seeks out such formal support services as respite care, education programs, in-home services or support groups. Service providers and researchers consistently observe that caregivers, especially spouses, seek formal assistance relatively late in the caregiving career. Whether or not a caregiver will choose to use a service depends on three judgments: the situation is deficient in some way, a particular service will address that deficiency and the benefits of using the service outweigh the psychological and monetary costs. For example, if a caregiving wife believes it is her duty to care for her husband, she might feel too guilty or embarrassed to seek professional help. On the other hand, if the burden of caregiving clearly increases beyond her ability to manage it, she might acknowledge the benefits of outside assistance. Until the individual caregiver can accept the value of seeking help, it is very difficult for family or friends to effectively suggest turning over all or part of caregiving responsibilities to professional providers.

#### **Marker 5: Consideration of placement in a facility**

The caregiver reaches the fifth marker when he seriously considers placing the elder person into a nursing home. Families often consider a housing change when they first recognize that a frail elder person needs care. However, if a caregiver instead decides to accept the caregiving role, the idea of nursing home placement might not be revisited until circumstances change. It is this reconsideration of placement in the context of terminating the direct caregiving role that characterizes marker 5.

Often caregivers, especially spouses of people with Alzheimer's disease, arrive at marker no. 5 quickly after hitting marker no. 4. When caregivers delay seeking services prior to seriously considering nursing home placement, there is little opportunity for services to play a preventive role.

#### **Marker 6: Institutionalization**

The sixth marker is placement in a care facility. Because many dependent elder people die without ever moving to a nursing home, some caregivers never reach this marker. It is important to note that, while the role of caregiver changes dramatically, it does not always end with institutionalization. The tasks of a direct care provider can be exchanged for those of advocate and care manager.

#### **Marker 7: Termination of the caregiving role**

Marker no. 7, termination of the caregiving role, acknowledges that caregiving, like

other social roles, can have an explicit end. There are three possible exit routes from the caregiving role: death of the elder person or caregiver, recovery of the person, or a request for the termination of the caregiving role (i.e., the caregiver quits).

### **Caregiving Differences between spousal caregivers and adult child caregivers**

- ◇ The caregiving experience of adult children differs from that of spouses in several ways.
- ◇ Children experience more freedom in their choices and can end caregiving more easily than spouses who might feel a greater obligation to this role.
- ◇ The caregiving role of children tends to be more limited and occurs in the earliest phases of the elder persons impairment.
- ◇ Spouses do not define themselves as caregivers until the elder person has reached a level of impairment at which most children have quit the caregiving role.
- ◇ When spouses assume the caregiving role, they tend to provide most of it themselves, while children, especially sons, tend to share the workload with their siblings or spouses.
- ◇ Spouses who must contend with major change in a significant and intimate relationship are more likely to experience the role as emotionally stressful, while children report that the role impacts on their time, energy and other familial relationships.

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