

[The Art of Living With Aging Parents](#)

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HEALING

The Art of Living With Aging Parents

Kindness, creativity and compromise are key qualities and skills to meet this modern need

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Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of Hinduism Today, always advised his devotees to take care of their aging parents and not leave the job to strangers. Damara Shanmugan, 57, took Gurudeva's advice. The following article is a result of her experiences. As more and more Hindus no longer live in joint families where the care of the parents is insured, they, too, may face a decision sometime in their life to either seek professional care for their parents in a home, or to recreate the joint family a challenging adventure, as we shall see.

Gurudeva advised us to live in total harmony at all times with each and every member of our family, the ideal being "zero tolerance for disharmonious conditions." To assist my parents, I moved back to our family home eight years ago and worked to fulfill Gurudeva's advice. My father passed away a year later, and I have lived with my mother since. These guidelines, observations and helpful hints have come to light over time.

I converted to Hinduism in 1992 through the namakarana samskara, naming-giving ceremony. My parents are not Hindus. They live by different standards and life-style choices than I do, and this made for a challenging experience. But true service is about the person or persons being served, not about the person doing the serving. Clearly, service is not about imposing our own beliefs, ideals and standards on anyone else; rather, it is about honoring those we serve exactly as they are.

As adult care-giving children, we need all the skills we can acquire for successfully and lovingly dealing with our aging parents. Positive discipline, the art of raising children based on treating each other with dignity and respect, is invaluable. These same positive discipline guidelines, used to raise our children and grandchildren without violence, are perfectly adaptable to all situations and all age groups. The ethical principles called yamas and niyamas can be applied even when aging parents and adult care-giving children are of different religions. Care is needed every day and in every negotiation. Communication skills are essential and extra care must be taken not to condescend in any way. Being in total harmony all of the time takes attention, constant inner vigilance, practice, persistence and patience.

Whether the adult care-giving child comes to live in the home of the aging parent(s) or the aging parent(s) come to live in their child's home, the following practical guidelines are basically the same.

1) You are still the child: Age seems to make no difference here. Kindness is needed after an adult care-giving child, age 57, has been reminded for the fourth time in 15 minutes to make sure that the front door is locked. Caring parents of any age seem to always take pleasure in making sure that their children are safe and prepared for any eventuality. Perhaps this keeps the mind of an aging parent keen, active and alert. It is wonderful to be so lovingly looked after.

2) Money matters: Parents learned to financially survive and thrive and tend to expect the exact same set of financial priorities and standards from their children and grandchildren when it comes to money, spending and investing.

It can cause a great deal of anxiety for the parent when it seems as though everyone younger is squandering money. Care must be taken to find a comfortable balance between the wisdom of the parent and the needs of the younger family. Most often, adults here in America that are caring for their aging parents keep their own finances completely separate as long as possible. This allows the parent to feel independent, responsible and useful. Even in the most loving and trusting relationships there can be confusion and hurt feelings about money. Loans should be avoided if at all possible, but if they do become necessary, payments should be made regularly. They should be promptly and cheerfully paid in full with much sincere gratitude toward the lender. The care-giving child should never assume that the parent's money is his or her own to do whatever he or she wants with. Nor do most parents want the added responsibility of managing the money of a grown

child. Responsibility for household expenses should be fairly divided or shared according to the family's financial situation.

If the parents have moved to the child's house, rather than to theirs as I have done, Gurudeva advised financially secure children to cover all the expenses of the home and not request rent or any money from the parents. Of course, that is not always possible.

Any negotiating needs to be done with the careful fairness based on dignity and respect. Special consideration should be given to the financial circumstances of both parties. Seldom are the care-giving child and the parent(s) on exactly equal financial ground. Honest communication, give and take and openness to change as time goes by will ensure that fairness persists. Any family wants to stay away from the bad karma of a "Cinderella " situation. "Poor little mother " or "poor little daughter " are equally unbalanced and unfair. If one party feels entitled to be totally financially taken care of by the other, it will foster despair and resentment. Joyfully decide what bills and needs are to be paid by whom.

3) The single parent: When one parent has passed away, the surviving parent often has expectations and passes along the duties and responsibilities of the deceased partner to the care-giving child.

"The knives need to be sharpened." Or, "The house needs to be painted."
Negotiation skills are essential here. Taking on and learning a new skill can be an exhilarating exercise in resourcefulness and ingenuity. It is up to the care-giver to know the difference between what is possible to learn and do and what must be contracted out to others, all according to the household budget and the agreement of all sides. It is OK to realize that some tasks cannot reasonably be done by you.

Most communities have wonderful senior services available. Take advantage of them. Whether it is attending a free seminar on the latest laws affecting living trusts or free flu shots, these services are well thought out and informative. Some senior centers even offer free exercise programs like yoga and swimming. In some cases, these services are available to both parties.

4) Freedom versus independence: Having an aging parent is like raising a teenager, only in reverse. Responsibilities and duties are only to be taken over when it becomes absolutely necessary. It can be very hard to give up one's independence. Often the tendency of the son or daughter is to do everything for the parent. But what seems to be kindness by the caretaker can be very debilitating and insulting, making the parent feel useless.

Aging parents should be allowed to drive as long as they can safely do so. They should be left to balance their own checkbooks and dole out their own medications as long as they can do so accurately. And yet, the son or daughter should not hesitate to take over any or all responsibilities and duties as it becomes necessary. It is a very delicate dance, and much prayer and sensitivity is needed.

Asking the parent questions like "Do you need my help? Can I help you?" might just be answered with, "No." It is better to ask, "How are you coming along with that? Be sure and let me know if I can help you." Changing a few words in any sentence can set a more harmonious and comfortable tone.

5) No longer fit to drive: When the parent is no longer able to safely drive an automobile, the adult care-giving child should cheerfully take the parent wherever he or she needs to go, safely and on time. This becomes the joyful job of the caretaker.

Many aging parents feel that the world is going too fast and that their adult care-giving child should slow down, starting with this car ride! Pointing out the legal speed limit is a good place to start to ease the fears of the parent.

Take a book along to read in the doctor or dentist's office or get a portable computer and answer your e-mail. Enjoy your parents' friends and get books for your own interests at the library.

Parents need to be lovingly encouraged to get out of the house sometimes. If no longer able to drive, they may feel they are a burden and be reluctant to bother you with going anywhere that is "unnecessary." Short, local trips can be planned, and

you can invite your parent to accompany you on errands or to visit with your friends, too. Taking mom along to a sewing class or a shopping trip can be fun for both of you.

Negotiating what to do with the extra vehicle, transfer of registration for the Department of Motor Vehicles, insurance and maintenance expenses all need to be worked out. Consideration should be given to which vehicle is the most economical to run, has the least amount of wear and tear and therefore will best benefit the family in the long run. It might mean a daughter gives up a passenger car for a truck or a son gives up a truck for a passenger car.

6) Privacy and lack thereof: Due to the influence of Westernized values, most adult care-giving children of aging parents have lived independently for a number of years while pursuing their careers and raising their children. Moving back in with or inviting a parent to live in your home can cause some interesting privacy issues. Compromise, communication and negotiation are the keys to working things out to everyone's mutual satisfaction. Simple common courtesies, such as knocking before entering, talking in a soft voice, keeping telephone conversations short, keeping the volume of music and television down, can solve many privacy issues. And, honestly, giving up some privacy is a natural part of any family's living together. Lack of privacy is generally hardest to adjust to when the child has lived alone for a period of time.

7) Your adjustments: Let's face it, living with parent(s) again as an adult is weird! It is like some kind of a warped *deja vu*. Some things are just as we remember them, and other things are completely different. We have spent decades living apart from our parents, all the time evolving into adults by virtue of our own life experiences. Meanwhile, our parents have evolved from healthy, all-knowing and confident adults into frail, unsure and dependent elders. Their children have gray hair. The relentless and inevitable changes of time are evident to all.

8) Agreeing to disagree: There are some basic life issues that adult children and parents may never agree on hot issues like vegetarianism, religion, politics, the concept of organic gardening, charity, holistic medicine, death and dying, heaven and hell. If argued about, or even discussed, these issues can cause constant disharmony within the home. It is good to identify such issues early on and avoid becoming entangled in the energy of two egos wanting the satisfaction of being right. Keeping our opinions to ourselves and allowing parents the dignity of

expressing their own beliefs is how we honor them.

It helps to understand where and how, they, as members of their own generation, and products of their own life experiences, have formed their beliefs. Living with an aging parent is not about trying to change his or her mind about anything. Futility is a good teacher. As a general rule, answer the questions you are asked as simply as possible and wait for another question. It is not a good idea to constantly tell a parent what we think about issues.

In living with others there are always the little things that can drive one another crazy. These are easily and quickly identified! Recognize what they are on your side and see that they never happen again. Make a happy game out of this. For example, Gurudeva always told us to leave a room cleaner than we found it and to work for the sake of the work, not the praise that we expect from it.

9) Accept your parents as they are: Changing another person is simply impossible (it's hard enough to change yourself!). If our aging parents annoy, disappoint or frustrate us, the only way that this can ever be turned around is for us, as adult care-giving children, to absorb our reactions within ourselves. Our aging parents are teaching us how to be aging parents. It is a wonderful life lesson being taught right before our very own eyes. We may learn how to be the perfect non-irritating, aging parent for our own adult children.

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is to treat our parents just as we hope to be treated in the future. Adult care-giving children are the living example to their own children and grand children. It has been said that we teach people how to treat us. May all of our acts and deeds, punyakarma and sukarma, bring loving reactions to us in the future.

Aging parents enjoy being a vital part of the extended family household. Being in the heart of an active household keeps them from becoming depressed and lonely. Generally, they love to recount stories and give guidelines and advice to just about anyone who will listen. Elders love to hold newborn babies for a minute or two, but it may not be wise to expect them to babysit infants for extended periods, but let being with young children and babies happen on an enjoyment level rather than on a responsibility level. Elders like quiet time and even solitude sometimes. But

careful attention should be paid for signs of depression.

10) End-of-life issues: Aging parents live their own lives and will die on their own terms. Expecting them to make decisions according to anyone else's standards and beliefs just sets us up for heartache. It is so important to support them by unconditionally honoring their personal decisions about living and dying. It can be frustrating when they are not willing or able to make even small changes to improve their life or health. Parents have their own karma and astrological timing.

The hospice movement is an organization of devas or angels put on this Earth to assist the family when the time to leave the body behind comes. It is important to recognize the inevitable moment when their help should be sought.

In July, 1995, amid Guru Purnima celebrations at Kauai Aadheenam in Hawaii, Gurudeva was asked the following question, "Many of us are now living with our aging parents, and they live by different standards and life-style choices than we do. Some of them smoke, eat meat and drink, for example. How are we, their Hindu adult care-giving children, to react to this?" Gurudeva smiled and said, "Light their cigarettes and pour their wine!" Everyone smiled.

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