

# Catholic Caregivers

*'Caregiving is pro-life!'*

## Caring for an In-law or a Stepparent

Being the caregiver of an in-law can be very different from taking care of your own parent. It brings out unique emotions and requires good communication skills. The same can be true when taking care of a stepparent, especially if he or she is someone who joined the family after you reached adulthood or if there has always been friction between you.

Every newlywed soon learns that you don't marry an individual; you "marry" a family—a family that may be very different from your own family of origin. But even newlyweds may not realize that a promise to stick by each other "in sickness and in health" can include a family member's sickness, too.

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Being an in-law's caregiver is a task that's both easier and harder than being your own parent's caregiver. It's easier because you probably don't know your mother-in-law or father-in-law as well as you know your parent, and the roles of caregiver and care-receiver may feel less awkward. You have no memories of being cared for by this person. And your in-law probably isn't able to push your buttons the way your own family members can. With an in-law, it's sometimes easier to feel one step removed. This doesn't mean you aren't concerned or you don't provide compassionate, loving care, but no matter how close you are to your in-law, it's just not the same as your relationship with your own mother or father.

On the other hand, it can be harder because you may feel you've been forced into this role. It's not uncommon for a son to want to take care of a parent but the daughter-in-law who provides the care. You may have little interest in taking care of an elderly person — especially someone who is pretty much a stranger. The relationship you've had with your in-law changes; you become the caregiver, and your in-law is the care-receiver. In that situation, you can't help but invade your in-law's privacy. Now you see

your mother-in-law disrobed and need to help her with a bath. Now you know your father-in-law's financial situation. It can lead you to feel resentful. Why are you putting so much of your time and energy, so much of yourself, into helping your spouse's parent?

These are some suggestions for how to cope with your new role:

-- *From the very beginning, involve your spouse as much as possible.* What you're doing is a wonderful gift to your spouse, but it's also something that can be extremely hard on your relationship. Your spouse may have unrealistic expectations about what you can do. You can become the focus of your spouse's anxiety as your in-law's health continues to deteriorate.

-- *Get your spouse's siblings involved.* Plan ahead and talk early and often with the family. If they live out of town, maybe they could help with finances (if that's needed) or with keeping extended family members up to date on what's happening. They can offer you some respite time.

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-- *Set limits when necessary.* With emotions running high, your spouse or a sibling may say, very emphatically, "I can't do that." Your silent response, with equal passion, may be: "And what makes you think I can?" Be honest. You can do some things, but you can't do that. Don't hesitate to bring in as much outside help as you need, even if the family frowns on that because it just "isn't the way we do things." Their way of doing things may be stepping back and letting the burden of being primary caregiver fall on your shoulders. No one can carry that load alone.

*For more information write Friends of St. John the Caregiver, P.O. Box 320, Mountlake Terrace, WA 98043; visit [www.FSJC.org](http://www.FSJC.org); or call 1-800-392-JOHN (5646).*

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