

# Catholic Caregivers

*'Caregiving is pro-life!'*

## Understanding Aging

Throughout our lives, our bodies change. As long as a human body is living, it's growing older. So how can you tell if your loved one is developing a new and potentially serious health problem, or if what you see is simply part of what could be called the natural aging process?

The temptation is to assume that a new problem your care-receiver develops is one every older person experiences and that nothing can be done about it. Not necessarily.

Take being confused, for example. Doesn't everyone, if he or she lives long enough, develop some form of mild dementia? Yes, the chances of developing a form of dementia (Alzheimer's disease being only one of the possible diagnoses) increase with age, but there are other reasons a senior might be confused. Maybe Dad's metabolism has changed, and a medicine he's taken for years is now causing side effects. Or the problem is a new medicine combined with what he's already taking. Maybe, without your knowledge, Mom is drinking more than she used to. Maybe she has had a small stroke.

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It's a good idea to do some research and then ask your loved one's primary physician about the "normal" aging process — what, in general, is to be expected — and keep the doctor up to date on what's happening with your care-receiver. If you see something new, ask the doctor about it. It's a good idea to consult with the physician even if you think what you see is to be expected with any chronic condition your loved one may have. (And it's important for you to know the usual progression of that condition as well.)

For example, your mother has arthritis, and she's

having more pain and more difficulty using her hands. Yes, her condition may grow worse over time, but perhaps a more effective medicine or treatment will help as the inflammation reaches this new stage. Would physical therapy help her feel better, and is it available? Would occupational therapy or an adaptive device make it easier for her to perform daily tasks like holding a fork or using a zipper? Ask about these things.

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Don't compare your care-receiver's condition or symptoms with another older person's. Maybe your best friend noticed that her father was growing hard of hearing, and he now wears a hearing aid. You notice your father's hearing isn't what it used to be, but you hesitate to bring up the subject with Dad or his doctor because you're fairly certain getting your parent to accept a hearing aid would be a tremendous battle. At the same time, Dad has noticed the trouble he's having, and he's worried but too frightened to say anything about it.

While you both tiptoe around the subject, the source of your father's problem may be nothing more than wax buildup in his ears. His doctor's nurse could quickly and easily take care of it and give both of you tips on how to avoid the problem in the future.

In other words, don't assume that you understand what you are seeing, and don't assume that there's little to be done about it. Remember that while you and your loved one may become very good at spotting and diagnosing a change or a problem, that's not the same as having an objective health-care professional evaluate what's happening. Let that person be the one to decide if it's an inevitable part of the aging process.

*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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