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Caring for Your Parents: The Complete AARP Guide

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Reviewed by Twyla A. Nielsen

Hugh Delehanty & Elinor Ginzler. (2005). *Caring for Your Parents: The Complete AARP Guide*. New York: Sterling, 240 pp., \$19.95 (hardcover). ISBN 1-4027-1739-3.

In *Caring for Your Parents: The Complete AARP Guide*, Delehanty and Ginzler provide an outline that will help family caregivers to embrace the issues that arise when dealing with aging parents. The authors' intent in writing this book is obvious to readers: assist the family caregiver in making decisions about end-of-life care with their parents. Both authors possess the professional background and expertise to make this book a "must read" for family caregivers.

Delehanty is the editor in chief of AARP (formerly American Association of Retired Persons) Publications and oversees America's two largest circulation publications, *AARP The Magazine* and *AARP Bulletin*. Delehanty also supervises the bilingual magazine *AARP Segunda Juventud* and AARP Books. Previously an editor at *People*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Utne Reader*, he has written extensively on psychology and spirituality and is the coauthor with Phil Jackson of the national best seller *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*. Delehanty is a former visiting professor in American Studies at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, and is a frequent contributor on *The Today Show*, *Good Morning, America*, and *NBC Nightly News*.

Ginzler has worked in the profession of aging for more than 20 years. After overseeing programs at the community level in senior housing and long-term care, she joined AARP in 1998 to run association programs in health, long-term care, and independent living. Ginzler currently is the Director for Livable Communities in the AARP's Office of Social Impact. In this capacity, she advocates for housing needs of those ages 50 and older and optimizing the mobility of older Americans. Ginzler has lectured on caregiving throughout the United States and is quoted regularly in the media as a spokesperson for AARP on eldercare issues.

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Caring for Your Parents: The Complete AARP Guide is composed of 10 chapters that “walk” caregivers from the first talk with their family members and aging parents, to assignment of the roles that each member will have in providing care, through the final stages of sorrow, grief, and healing. The book begins with an account from Delehanty of his experience as the caregiver for his ailing 80-something father who had Parkinson’s disease. Delehanty recounts conferring with his two brothers and a social worker he knew who specialized in end-of-life care to help him discuss the situation with his father. He refers to this moment as “the death talk” (p. 1). Delehanty cautions the caregiver that “[if you] think you are just doing a job fixing a person, who is weaker than you, there will always be a wall between the two of you” (p. 4). However, if caregivers approach the situation with the viewpoint that those receiving care are going through a natural process, caregivers and their parents will begin to develop a profound connection. One emerging theme is that the key to successful caregiving is self-forgiveness. Delehanty indicates that caregivers often punish themselves for not being perfect. No matter how angelic, caregivers are not going to save their parents’ lives or completely ease their suffering. However, caregivers are given the opportunity for real intimacy with their parents.

Delehanty and Ginzler share the techniques for reconciliation with, understanding of, and acceptance of parents as caregivers work through the process of giving care and the realization that helping can be one of life’s greatest joys. The authors have organized the process of caregiving from recognizing that parents are beginning to have difficulties with the routines of daily life—unopened bills piling up on the kitchen table, trouble walking around or driving to the store for groceries—to the finality of death, saying good-bye, and the stages of healing for the family. The chapters are well organized and are not only reader friendly but also structured. Opportunity exists for readers to assess where in the process they may be within the constructs of their own family. The book’s format presents opportunities for readers to reflect upon their personal self needs and caring for themselves as well as maintaining respect and nurturing their aging parents through life’s final stage.

The final two chapters give readers some perspectives on saying good-bye and dealing with issues such as sorrow, grief, and healing. The authors indicate the importance of being realistic about how aging parents will face the end of life. They write that people generally tend to face death in much the same way as they approached their life. Dying is an opportunity to show great courage—not only by the dying person but also by the family members. Caregiver’s acknowledgment of their parents’ courage and of being proud of them for their courage is an important step in those last days.

The strengths of this book lie in the authors’ abilities to reach out to readers with understanding and empathy and offer practical advice in the form of worksheets that even the most apprehensive caregiver may use to plan for today and for the future. The authors provide resource guides in every chapter that

include help lines, Web sites, books, brochures, and consumer action groups to consult for assistance. Success stories profile innovative caregivers from a variety of cultures. Practical strategy sidebars offer advice for introducing sensitive topics such as assisted living residences, helping parents remain safe drivers, and discovering the benefits for which parents may qualify.

This book would be an asset to counselors who are facilitating groups in which the participants are caregivers for aging parents. The authors outline a process that is easy for the layperson to comprehend and follow. The group setting could be constructed by using the book's chapters and provided worksheets and by familiarizing group participants with the book's glossary of terms (which are generally recognized by professionals working with the aging population). Allowing time for group participants to share personal stories is important and could serve as the foundation of the group setting and provide an introduction to each chapter. Overall, this book provides caregivers with the needed tools to help aging parents transition into the end-of-life stage and provides counselors with a step-by-step process that promotes effective caregiving.