

Caring for Your In-Laws

Learn ways to help establish boundaries with aging in-laws while still contributing to their care and well-being.

If you have a wonderfully close relationship with your in-laws, you might already be looking forward to providing some level of care for them as they get older. After all, they're like a second set of parents to you, and you're eager to help them, just as they've helped you throughout the years.

Unfortunately, not everyone has a seamless dynamic with their in-laws. In these cases, it can be difficult to navigate caregiving expectations and responsibilities. If you have in-laws who need care, but you're wrestling with how much you're willing and able to contribute, read on. While everyone's situation is unique, the following strategies can help you determine the best path forward.

Stay in Control of Your Contribution

Are people looking to you to provide the majority of caregiving for your in-laws? Living close to your in-laws doesn't necessarily mean that the majority of caregiving tasks should fall on you or your spouse. If you're able and willing to be the lead caregiver, great. If not, work to express your boundaries. Maybe you dedicate one afternoon a week to taking your in-laws to their medical appointments. Maybe you bring over three meals every week. If your relationship with your in-laws is marked by tension, you might be more comfortable with a "behind the scenes" role, like handling insurance paperwork.

Think about how you'd like to contribute, state your willingness to help, and be specific about what that help will be. Remember: The best way to avoid future resentment about caretaking is to respectfully and clearly communicate your point of view.



Be Empathetic and Honest with your Partner

Have conversations with your partner about what you're willing to take on. Try to enter these conversations with empathy – think about how you would like your partner to approach caregiving if the situation were reversed. What would you hope or expect from him or her if you needed help caring for your own parents?

State your hopes and concerns about providing care to your in-laws. Talk about what your limits might be. Are you open to having your in-laws move in with you at some point, or is that out of the question? Why or why not? Share your thoughts on enlisting professional help. Throughout it all, communication is key. Keep the conversation ongoing, and make tweaks and adjustments to your role as needed.

Have a Voice

If you provide care to your in-laws, then it may make sense that you be part of the conversations regarding their health and well-being. Your caregiving will give you insights that others might miss. If discussions are happening without you, it may be the right time to speak up and say, “I’ve been willing to be a part of the caregiving team, and I think it’s only fair that you involve me in conversations. I’d like to share my perspective so we’re making informed decisions.”

Enjoy the Upside

Try to enter into your role as caregiver – however you define it – with an open heart and a fresh attitude. While the memory of past disagreements may never go away, this new phase of life can present opportunities for healing. A patient and compassionate approach to caregiving doesn't mean it won't be frustrating at times, but at the very least, you can feel good about supporting your partner.

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