



## The Role of a Physical Therapist in Healthy Aging

The terms “healthy aging” and “aging well” are used quite often, but people outside the aging services or health care sectors rarely understand the full meaning of these phrases. We’d like to remind you of the value of physical therapy in supporting the health and independence of America’s older adults.

In the past, physical therapy was perceived as a reactionary profession; most people believed physical therapists (PTs) only worked with people after they were injured. This misconception overlooks much of the value physical therapists offer the older adult community to keep them safe and independent. PTs are changing their profession to include not only treatment of injuries, but also education on preventive strategies that reduce injuries altogether.

Physical therapists are highly trained health care professionals with an expertise in movement and exercise. Their skills and knowledge base are essential when dealing with the complexities of aging. Physical therapy training includes assessment, exercise prescription, and progression, all with appropriate monitoring. All these skills can be utilized for older adults before injury happens. PTs can play a key role in the prevention of injury, functional decline, and disability.

### **Fitness at any age is made up of five key aspects:**

- flexibility
- strength
- endurance
- posture
- balance



Extensive studies have provided norms for each of these categories. By using these guidelines to determine what is normal for older adults of similar age and gender, physical therapists can explain how a patient’s circumstances compare with that of their peers. More importantly, a physical therapist can assess results against important thresholds related to falls, disability, and even mortality. When areas of concern are identified, a PT can prescribe individualized exercises to strengthen key muscles, improve balance and flexibility, and increase overall well-being.

Include physical therapists in your list of options and resources for aging well. The knowledge and expertise they provide can prevent or reduce issues before they arise, and make it easier for you to stay healthy and independent.

*Source: The National Council on Aging ([www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org)), a respected national leader and trusted partner to help people aged 60+ meet the challenges of aging.*

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# When Your Spouse Is a Caregiver

“For better or for worse, in sickness and in health ... “ When we make our wedding vows, we think about what the future will bring for ourselves and our partner—but few of us consider how true the old saying is that “you’re not only marrying a spouse—you’re marrying their family!” Today, people are living longer, which means more of us will be providing care support for our parents as they grow older.



When each spouse has parents who need care, it can be a balancing act that overloads them both. Maybe the couple had long planned a carefree retirement, only to end up spending most of their spare time and a lot of their spare funds on their older parents. When only one spouse has caregiving duties, the challenges are a bit different. “I expected to travel a lot with Nancy after we retired,” says Leonard. “But when Nancy’s dad moved in with us, things changed so much. I’m not proud of it, but I find myself feeling resentful.”

Your history with your spouse’s parent can influence your experience of this time. Many people have a long and close relationship with their in-laws—maybe even better than with their own parents. (For the purpose of this article we will use the term “in-laws,” though not all couples in this situation are married.)

In other cases, the relationship has been strained—or, if you were married later in life, you may not have much of a relationship at all. “When Don and I married,” says Ken, “his parents didn’t come to the wedding and they’ve only recently begun to treat me like family.”

**Whatever the situation, there are things you can do to support your spouse or partner as they support their parents.**

**Learn all you can about your in-law’s health condition.** Your spouse may be up to their ears in practical tasks. Maybe reading about their parent’s illness, especially if it is dementia or a terminal condition, may be emotionally difficult for them. Having you as a resource will most likely be much appreciated.

**Learn about caregiver challenges and emotions.** Your partner is probably experiencing some grief and frustration at the changes in their parent. This is where you can offer valuable support—and because you are more removed from the situation, you can be a safe place for your partner to vent. (FYI: Even if your spouse vents about their parent, they might become defensive if you do the same. It can be a complicated dynamic! Your spouse may have mixed feelings about the situation, but may not feel safe expressing those feelings if they feel they have to manage your emotions as well. It’s often best to just listen.)

**Go to a counselor, either on your own or as a couple.** Caregiving and conflicting needs can put a tremendous strain on a marriage. A counselor who is trained in family situations can provide a safe place to express emotions, and can help you balance priorities and set boundaries. Even if your in-law’s needs are great at this time, your relationship should still be a priority.

**Encourage your spouse to get caregiving help.** Many caregivers somehow think they need to do it all themselves—which can be very frustrating for their spouse! Offer to take over some of your spouse’s caregiving tasks. And research senior support services in your area. Look into home care if your in-law wants to stay at home. Check out supportive senior living communities, where your in-law will not only find help with their care needs, but also opportunities to socialize and be active. An aging life care professional (geriatric care manager) can help you locate services.

**Pick up slack where you can.** This is a time for you to take a greater share of childcare responsibilities, go shopping, prepare meals, do the laundry—whatever you can move off of your spouse’s plate. Here too, consider bringing in outside help. Then, use some of that newfound time to put a regular date night on the calendar!

**Set aside “old business.”** Maybe it was obvious that your mother-in-law didn’t think you were good enough for her boy. Remind yourself that “that was then, this is now.” Your dynamic with your in-law is different these days. Many seniors develop a very different attitude about their children’s spouses when they are helping with care—but even if that’s not the case for you, remember you are doing this for your spouse.

**Rethink gender roles.** In the past, it was automatically assumed that if a man’s elder parents needed help and he had a wife, she would be the one to provide that help. But remember, just as more men are taking an active role in parenting, there are now more male elder caregivers in the U.S.—40%, say experts. Divide the labor by who’s good at it. “Carmen was really uncomfortable helping her dad to the toilet,” said her husband Carl. “I took that over, and they both appreciated it. Her dad and I have some good conversations and share a lot of silly jokes when it’s just the two of us like that.”

**Encourage your spouse to call a family meeting.** Invite your spouse’s siblings, adult children and other family members to put their heads together for creating a care plan. If your spouse is providing the lion’s share of care, help make a list of tasks they are doing, the money your family is spending, and information on how senior care affects your family. Most likely, other family members will be willing to help if they know what’s needed.

### **This stage of life can be one of the greatest challenges a couple faces.**

But supporting your spouse in this way can bring you closer than ever. Experts from the Association for Psychological Science recently reported that people with happy spouses live longer! And here’s one more

plus: your relationship with your in-law may well deepen and improve during this time. It could help bring the whole family together.

## **Does Video Chatting With the Grandparents Count as “Screen Time”?**



The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends limiting the time that children spend interacting with digital and electronic devices. If you are a grandparent, you’ve probably been cautioned not to allow the grandchildren to spend hours glued to the TV, playing video games, or other “screen time.”

But here’s some good news for grandparents. The AAP says that video chatting with relatives is an exception to the rule, and time spent in that way need not be limited. A study that appeared in the *International Journal of Child-Computer Interaction* found that video chat fosters important relationships and a continuum of familiarity between grandparents and grandchildren—most notably if they live at a distance, but also for those who are just chatting from across town.

So plan to regularly connect with the younger generation in this way. Read a story, look at their latest drawings or watch them practice their piano lesson. The next time you meet in person, it will take much less time for the kids to become reacquainted and comfortable with you.



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## 20 Healthy Aging Resolutions for 2020

Did you make New Year's resolutions this year? Here are 20 things you can do to take care of your physical, mental and emotional health during 2020!



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BALANCE CLASS  
CAREGIVER SUPPORT  
COUNSELING  
EXERCISE  
EYE EXAM  
FALL PREVENTION  
FLOSSING  
FRIENDSHIPS  
HEALTH SCREENINGS  
HEALTHY WEIGHT  
HOME SAFETY