



Winterizing your parents

Are they ready for the perils of New England's unpredictable weather? Ways you can help.

by B.J. Roche

➔ **WHEN YOU'RE A PARENT**, autumn brings homework checks and a return to a regular schedule. But if you're a daughter caring for an elderly parent, it's time to plan for colder weather and the challenges that winter can bring. You can't do much about New England weather, but with a bit of planning, you can make the season safer for your aging parent and less stressful on those around her.

Rule number one: ask for help. The saying "it takes a village" applies to aging parents as much as to children. Enlist your siblings and other family members (or a neighbor or friend), and connect with the free and reasonably priced resources in your community. When mom complains about spending money on her care (and trust me, she will), just say this: "Mom, I love ya, but this is why you saved all these years."

Jim Reynolds, CEO of Caring Companion Home Care, a Boston-based home care agency, urges his clients to start with a realistic assessment of the parent, particularly if you see him or her every day. You might not have noticed the subtle physical or mental changes, such as loss of balance or diminished cognitive abilities, that can have an impact on his or her well-being during winter. If your mom and dad are still driving, this might be the time to make other arrangements.

"Look for changes," says Jim Reynolds. "Realize, that person's status may have been consistent for nearly all the time

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—JIM REYNOLDS

you've known them, and you're used to looking at them in a certain way. So you really need to be observant."

Safety is the overriding issue, says Reynolds: Scan your parent's living quarters, with a particular eye for objects that present a risk for falls, such as coffee tables and throw rugs. With shorter days and declining eyesight, lighting can be a real problem, so upgrade dimly lit areas like stairs or hallways. Many elderly people cut back on heat to save money, so check the thermostat when you visit. The few dollars they might save won't seem like much if they develop pneumonia.

Older people can get isolated in winter, which can lead to depression and even hoarding, says Reynolds. If your parent is still living on her own, make sure family members are stopping by, and call on members of her faith community to visit. Most towns have a Council on Aging that operates a senior center, where seniors can socialize and have meals or take classes. Many even offer van pickups by reservation.

And when your mother says, "I'm not going there because I'm not old" (trust me, she will), Reynolds says, tell her this: "Mom, it's a free movie!"

Consider hiring a part-time home-care aide to take dad out for groceries, check on medications, clean, or check e-mail. A good agency will match your parent with the right person, and you may be surprised at the difference it makes for everyone to have a non-family member helping with some of these duties.

Holidays, with their traditions and family logistics, can sometimes be tough, so don't leave much to chance when there's an elderly parent in the mix. Reduce expectations, simplify the meal, spread out the duties, and do some advanced planning so that everyone can have an enjoyable day.

"Assign someone the specific task of watching dad or mom," says Reynolds. "Because they can get overtired and overstimulated, they don't want to be a bother or admit they don't have the stamina they once had."

And don't be afraid to offer up an excuse to get mom or dad home.

"Plan for someone ... to say, 'I've got to stop by the office, and dad lives nearby.' Whatever it is, have a plan to get them out of there if you need to."

If you're traveling with your parent by air for the holidays, get to the airport extra early. Everything is likely to take longer — from getting through security to getting the gear into the overhead. Even if your mother doesn't use a wheelchair, reserve one for the long trip to the gate. And if she doesn't want to use it (trust me, she won't), say this: "You must do this or we're not getting on the plane." Or something like that.

Finally, says Reynolds, during the winter months you need to keep tabs on your elderly parent in ways that you didn't before. All kinds of devices are available now, from a sensor that can monitor the temperature in mom's house to GPS devices for parents who tend to wander. Caregivers can update family members using the Web (see sidebar for resources).

In all the stress of caring for an aging parent, it's easy to forget to have fun. But that's a mistake. "At every stage of life, you can make a difference in the quality of life," says Reynolds. "You can always make a day better or not as good."

And it's not so hard to make a winter day better. Just call your mother and say, "Hey, Ma, what are you up to? Feel like going to Friendly's?" (Trust me, she probably will.) ●

B.J. Roche teaches journalism at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and publishes a website for midlife women called fiftyshift.com



THESE RESOURCES CAN HELP YOU WITH ELDERCARE YEAR ROUND

Your local **Council on Aging** offers lots of free and low-cost services and activities, such as trips, classes, social events, and performances. Many serve regular meals for a nominal fee, and have outreach workers who can help home-bound individuals. If you're just beginning a caregiving plan, it's a good place to start. You can find it listed on your town's website.

The Home Care Alliance of Massachusetts (thinkhomecare.org) is a nonprofit trade association of care agencies. They can help you find a home-care aide.

WEBSITES

800AgeInfo (<http://contactus.800ageinfo.com/FindAgency.aspx>), a joint effort between the Mass. Executive Office of Elder Affairs and the Mass. Home Care Association, offers information on caregiving and resources for Massachusetts residents.

Caretogether.com offers a free portal that enables families to share information about their elderly parents.

Denise Brown's **Caregiving.com** offers a wealth of resources and ideas for all types of caregiving, including a free e-book, *The Working Family Caregiver*.

