

# Caring for Abusive Parents

By Stephanie Bouchard

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<https://chicagocaregiving.com/caregiving-abusive-parents/>

## When abusive parents need caregiving, adult children often face a difficult decision.

A contract often exists between parents and children, whether spoken or not: Parents protect and care for their child when the child is most vulnerable, and in return, the child as an adult cares for their parents in their old age.

But what happens when parents break that contract by abusing or neglecting their child? Does the adult child still hold up their end of the contract?

It's up to the child, really. And in the U.S., there are millions of people in this situation. One in every four children in the U.S. [experiences abuse or neglect](#), according to a 2023 study. And the effects of the abuse don't end once the child becomes independent.

In fact, adults who were maltreated as children often experience ongoing repercussions. These include chronic health problems and difficulties forming healthy relationships.

For many adult children, taking care of the parents who abused them or trying to make the decision of whether or not to care for their abuser is an emotional quagmire.

“Something that comes up often is that people feel like they have to, because ‘it’s my mom’ or ‘it’s my dad,’” says [Sheehan Fisher, PhD](#), associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University.

For others — women in particular — there are additional societal pressures and expectations. Adult children from cultures that revere parents no matter what the parents have done may feel they don't have a choice.

However, adult children need to realize they do have choices, says [Mark Bilkey, PsyD](#), gerontologist and associate chair of the counseling department at Adler University. Often, though, “people don't know the choices they may have.”

## Assessing the situation

To figure out those choices, the adult child needs to thoroughly assess themselves and their parent, and an objective professional, Bilkey says. He suggests questions such as:

- What is each person's financial situation, and can services be contracted from outside?
- What level of care will the adult child be giving?
- Does the parent need help meeting daily needs, such as bathing and eating? Will these be triggers for trauma?
- Will the adult child be living with the parent?
- What is the current state of the relationship with the parent?
- Is the parent still abusive?
- Has there been any kind of practitioner intervention, such as counseling?
- Has the relationship experienced healing?
- Has there been any counseling or discussion of the abuse?

And if the adult child decides to care for the parent, it's crucial for the adult child to have support, too. The process will likely raise many emotional issues, possibly including retraumatization. A friend, counselor, social worker, or support group — someone objective — can help, Bilkey says.

If an adult child decides to care for [a parent who remains actively abusive](#), the adult child should develop a plan for how they will handle abusive situations with their parent, says [Jocelyn Carter, PhD](#), professor of clinical psychology at DePaul University.

“These are things that are really, really hard to respond to in the moment when they come up, so it is good to have a plan, to have a couple of phrases ready to go,” Carter says. “It’s basically letting them know, ‘If you continue talking to me like this, I will leave the situation.’”

### **Shifting response**

Adult children also need to understand that caregiving for their parent is not an all-or-nothing situation. Once they’ve committed, things can change.

“Whatever decision the (adult) child makes at one point in time, they don’t have to keep that decision,” Carter says. They can increase their involvement, decrease it, or cease caregiving altogether.

People tend to ignore or override their emotional experience because they feel they’ve made a choice and they need to keep their commitment, Fisher says, adding, “Well, no. That is not taking a full account of the full reality. That person needs to feel entitled to make a change that could be intermittent or unilateral of how they want to engage with that parent.”

Adult children who restrict their involvement or decide not to care for their parents at all often face the additional emotional burden of other peoples’ judgment and even self-judgment. Try not to feed into that. After all, being a good person doesn’t come with forgiveness requirements. “A ‘good person’ doesn’t mean that you have to be a pushover or a doormat,” Fisher says.

“We have a very strict definition of what it means to be a good person, and that is many times toxic,” he adds. “A good person could be a person who completely cuts off the parents who abused them so that they can be okay and so that their own personal family, their partner, their kids, can also be in a healthy environment.”

About the Author: Stephanie Bouchard is a freelance journalist who writes about health and wellness, lifestyles, and pets, [www.stephaniebouchard.net](http://www.stephaniebouchard.net)