

## The Emotional Journey of Relative Caregiving

**M**any relative caregivers have said they just didn't know how hard everything would be until the day came when they realized that they were now the "parent" to their relative's children.

Many also didn't know that parenting again would bring them on a roller coaster of emotions and change the way they feel about everything, including their own definition of family.

### Change is Hard

Often children are placed in the homes of relative caregivers because of safety concerns for the children or concerns about the parent's ability to provide appropriate care for their children.

Maybe you are hoping that your relative will turn things around and come to see how her behaviors are affecting her children's lives. Maybe the children were only supposed to be with you for a few months and those few months have now turned into a couple of years.

When the children were first placed, you probably worried more about the children. But as more and more time passes, you may be beginning to understand the amount of loss and stress this family change has brought you.

### Journey of Feelings

The feelings that you experience are probably total opposites and range from being happy one moment to angry and sad the next. You're

not alone—many caregivers feel like this.

### Emotional Ups

Not everything is stressful, however. Or, if they are stressful, many families thrive in spite of it. Jeff and Cindy Ziegler are an aunt and uncle in southern Wisconsin who took in their niece.

Jeff Ziegler says, "It was fun to see her meld into the family and be just another part of it. I also enjoyed the candid conversations of what her life was like and how she helped to improve it."

He goes on to say, "She seemed to appreciate that we were home with our children and cared what they were up to. She had a chance to be a kid instead of being the care giver in the family."

Other caregivers have had similar feelings that include:

*All in all, the experience was quite wonderful. As time went by, we all forgot the ugly parts and revel in all the good times and fun we had.*

**Comfort** that you're able to provide a safe, nurturing environment.

**Pride** and accomplishment when the children learn a new skill, like tying a shoe.

**Patience** in learning how to parent your relative's children and navigate systems like foster care, energy assistance, or Women Infants and Children (WIC).

**Inspiration** from other relative caregivers who are doing the same thing as you everyday. How do they do it and why don't the news shows talk

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about this more?

**Encouragement** from your family and friends that you are really doing the right thing—even when it feels like nothing is going right.

**Happiness** when you see the smiles on the faces of the children or hear their laughter.

**Love** from the hugs and kisses you get.

**Compassion** for the children when they cry because they miss their parent(s).

**Hope** for the children, your relative, and yourself as you all go through a time of big change.

### *Emotional Downs*

About the emotional struggles, Ziegler says, “The lows were a while in coming but they came. She *did* start to resent the fact that she was one of the family and that she needed to live up to the same standards as the rest of the children in the house. Bed times, permission, her share of the duties, homework schedules, and someone that made her be accountable were things she was not used to and was quite unhappy about it.”

Ziegler says, “After a couple of months, she forgot about all the ‘stuff’ that was happening at her house and defended those who had caused her all that pain.”

“Being compared to those who gave her no limits was also a problem for me,” he says. “I felt bad when she would lash out at me. I also thought I was taking away from my own

children to spend so much time on her problems.”

Other caregivers have lows that include:

**Fear** that you do not have enough resources to provide for the children like you desire.

**Anger** that the child’s parents are not doing all that they can or should be doing to make the situation better for the children.

**Guilt** when feeling angry and responsible for your relative’s poor choices or inability to parent.

**Sacrifice** of your time, energy, financial resources, and role as the grandfather or cousin or uncle to be the parent instead—so many sacrifices yet so little appreciation.



### **Loss and**

**disappointment** of everything that was familiar, including your goals and future plans. Your world has turned upside down, yet few acknowledge your personal loss. What you had planned in this stage in your life now looks completely different.

**Frustration** if the reunification plan isn’t working out like you hoped.

**Sadness** for yourself—that you’re giving up a piece of yourself and your established role to parent these children.

**Confusion.** Some days it can feel like you don’t know which way is up or down.

**Embarrassment** that your relative isn’t able to be the parent due to many possible reasons like mental

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health issues, incarceration, drugs, alcohol, violence, or abandonment.

**Isolation** when you feel like you're the only one in this situation.

These losses can also leave you without very many people to talk to because of the stigma, fear of judgment, lack of social recognition, understanding, and support of others. Your feelings *do* matter and if your support system doesn't understand, your emotional journey can seem that much more difficult.



Find out if there is a local support group or find a couple of close adults who understand your situation. Find a counselor if you are having difficulty finding a neutral support network or need professional help. Talking about things and finding others who have experienced similar situations can really help. You can find a [list of support groups](#) on our website.

### You're Not Alone

So how can you recognize your feelings in order to deal with them? You can start by recognizing that the behaviors of your adult relative are not necessarily a reflection on you, your family, or your parenting (if you're a grandparent).

By knowing this, hopefully you'll be able to talk about your situation more and ask for help. If you haven't checked out a support group for relative caregivers, now might be the time to make that call.

After all, it might not be an easy journey that you are on but you are not alone. Many others have walked in your shoes and have

felt the same exact way as you.

Finally, sometimes you just need some time to regain some perspective. As Ziegler says about their experiences, "All in all, the experience was quite wonderful. As time went by, we all forgot the ugly parts and revel in all the good times and fun we had. After the fact, my niece was incredibly thankful for the opportunity to have been one of our family and never misses a chance to tell me that."



## Resources

### [Resources for Relative Caregivers](#)

From our [Library](#):

- ***Grandparents as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family***, by Sylvie de Toledo & Deborah Edler Brown
- ***Relatives Raising Children: An Overview of Kinship Care***, by Joseph Crumbley & Robert Little
- ***To Grandma's House We Stay***, by Sally Houtman
- ***Parenting Someone Else's Child: The Foster Parents How To Manual***, by Ann Stressman
- ***Understanding Your Special Needs Grandchild: A Grandparents' Guide***, by Clare Jones



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