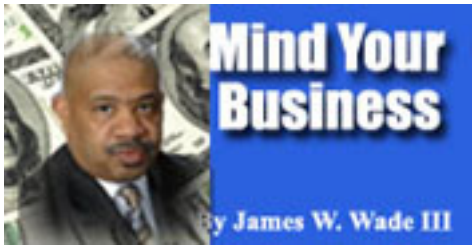

When you're faced with the prospect of caring for a parent, something clicks and you get an understanding that somehow things are going to be a little different.

The cost of caring for our elders

Have you ever taken time to think about your financial future?

Many of us always think about retirement and paying our house off, but how many think of what it would cost to take care of an aging/sick relative.

While aging is inevitable, planning for the costs associated with dependency in the latter phase of life doesn't come easily to most Americans. Most places are very expensive and can cost upwards to in the thousands each month.

As our parents age and need more assistance, most adult children do what they can to help. For many of us, the first step is they frequent stop to visit your parents, assess their situation, and perhaps help with some chores, always reminding them to call you in any emergency.

It is very clear not everyone is cut out to be a caregiver and those put their parents away then visit weekly. You may find that while you are glad not to be juggling a job and your care giving responsibilities, you miss the work atmosphere. You miss your paycheck. You miss the social interaction you had as an employed person.

And yet providing long-term care is, in fact, common. Nearly 10 million adult children are caring

for aging parents, according to the MetLife Mature Market Institute. Other adult children are contributing to the cost of a parent's assisted-living care, which MetLife says averages about $3,500 a month.

"The percentage of adult children providing personal care and/or financial assistance to a parent has more than tripled over the past 15 years," the research group found. Of course, in today's tough economy, it also is common for elderly adults to be supporting their adult children. But in some ways, that's easier to accept. Parents often plan to leave whatever wealth they have to their children anyway. The flow of wealth from older to younger generation feels natural to many.

But with Americans living so much longer now, the younger generation has to do more thinking about how they might care for parents who have exhausted their savings. Each year I see more and more 100 plus people celebrating birthdays now.

If you're like me and have both parents living, the thought has never crossed your mind about putting them in a facility. If you have, are you prepared? I guess most would have to do some research and see what's a good place to house them and the cost.

These conversations are often not talked about with parents and their children, but it's time for a serious plan for the thought of caring for aging parents. You must not only have discussions about money but with a legal document designating someone as having "power of attorney." That paperwork grants authority to another individual to handle decisions if a loved one can't make them as a result of illness or memory loss.

Having the power of attorney saves most families from a lot of arguing and fighting about who is solely responsible. This provides a big safety net and once the legal paperwork is done, families can turn to an array of sources for legitimate advice on boosting savings, buying appropriate insurance, and maximizing home equity.

Coming to the realization that your parents will not live forever and that you will soon be taking care of them financially, health wise, or both is a tough concept to get used to. I would equate it to the kind of change you experience having your first child. No matter what people tell you about how your life will change, you need to experience it for yourself to really understand it.

When you’re faced with the prospect of caring for a parent, something clicks and you get an understanding that somehow things are going to be a little different.

The financial burden can be avoided with a little planning early on. Just like a family member needs to know your personal wishes even for your homecoming service. What funeral home you want? What type of casket and color you desire? Do you want anyone special to sing or do the eulogy? These are all questions that should be in writing somewhere for the family.

Those in their 60s and 70s, who looked forward to the years of retirement with their promise of freedom from the responsibilities that bound them before, are now asking: When do I get to live my life for myself? The younger ones – who at middle age – are already stretched thin by their own financial problems, worried about how they’ll provide for their children’s education, whether they’ll ever have enough for their own retirement, and how they’ll live the rest of their lives are asking: How can I do it all?