

“Managing the Caregiver Role” (January 11, 2012)

In my career, I have worked with many people who, whether or not they identified themselves as such, were caregivers. As parents, many people readily accept the role of caregiver for their children, recognizing that small, vulnerable individuals need physical care, guidance and support. However, when that role becomes one that must be filled for a spouse, parent or other loved one, it can be overwrought with painful emotions. Concerns about how to balance work, home-life and care giving develop. Anger over role changes may emerge, or resentment about the tendency for a care-giving relationship to become one-sided, especially when caring for individuals with significant cognitive impairments. Rarely do caregivers step into their role with exuberance, full of energy for the task ahead. More typically, they are coping with the new diagnosis of a loved one, feeling sad about the impending loss of that person and maybe already grieving changes in the person’s abilities or personality.

While studying in Rhode Island, I was employed to determine the needs of a small group of elder caregivers in order to create appropriate programs for them through a local adult day center. Following each interview I conducted with the caregivers, I was struck by the sheer impossibility of their lives. Many were caring for parents or spouses in their homes while holding down full-time jobs and raising children or managing the needs of a stressed home life. Care-giving was an overwhelming task that put many people into depressed states where they no longer did anything that brought enjoyment and felt trapped in their lives. This is a common scenario for many elder caregivers in our society.

While there is much written about the stresses of care giving with tips on how to relax, take care of ourselves, etc. there is less heard about the specific issues integral to providing such care. One issue that is at the core of providing care to elders is the family conflict that often arises. While one person in a family may become the one housing an elder, that individual should not become the sole caregiver. Yes, in a perfect world everyone in the family partakes in the care. That is not always the case but let’s consider how we might move in that direction...

While at a networking meeting today, the guest speaker, Barry J. Jacobs, Psy.D., spoke very eloquently about how to resolve family conflicts that develop when an elder family member is no longer able to manage his/her care independently. As a result of the discussions that evolved, I have included some ideas here:

1. Develop a regular meeting time with family members to discuss needs and delegate responsibilities. If several family members are too far away to attend a meeting in-person, set up a chat online at a regularly scheduled time.
2. Develop a listserv that all family members are on so that everyone is informed about what is going on and when.
3. Share the financial responsibility of care. Set up a separate account that all family members contribute to. Expenses for the elder can be deducted from this account.
4. Be mindful of how your interactions during this stressful time will impact your future relationships.
5. Consider attending support groups together.
6. If you and your family are feeling overwhelmed and can't find a place to start, seek out consultation with a professional to gain some clarity and/or direction.

In addition to these thoughts, it is very important that caregivers **MAKE TIME FOR THEMSELVES**. Often when I ask individuals who are care giving for others, "and how are you holding up?" their eyes begin to well up with tears. They have stopped thinking about their own needs, or are too busy to consider them. If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to take care of anyone else. Take advantage of respite programs, hire someone for a few hours to take over for you, do something you love, and seek support!

For other ideas, written by other caregivers, go to "Caretips" at the top of the page on www.caregivers.com.

For more information about Barry J. Jacobs, Psy.D., go to www.emotionalsurvivalguide.com

