CAREGIVER-CENTERED Approach to Caring for Your Parents and Others

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As a child, many of us dream of being superheroes swooping in to save the day with nothing being out of our reach or incapable of accomplishment. As we age, our responsibilities grow with our careers, marriage, children, activities and then our aging parents. We want to be able to do it all and care for everyone, and others expect this from us too. But in effect, we spread ourselves so thin that we can break at any moment. This is commonly called caretaker burnout.

You're not alone. Millions of people around the world go through the stages of burnout. Having an unexpected or progressive illness or disease affect your parent has many challenges. Just changing your role from the person you are to a caretaker is a huge change. For some, just the role reversal from being your parents’ child to their caretaker can be extremely overwhelming. Now you’re making decisions for the ones who had such an influence on your choices for a majority of your life. When you were a teenager, it was no trouble doing what was necessary for the apron strings to release. Forty-percent of caregivers are themselves older than 50. As a 50- or 60-year-old, there really isn’t much pleasure in going against your elderly parents’ wishes, even if you’re doing what’s best for them. And also keep in mind, that more than a half-million seniors older than 65 are primary caregivers for grandchildren, so caregivers are often seniors themselves.

Now add in the enormous expectations on yourself and those imposed by others; financial constraints; the availability of resources which may include the absence of extended family support; and managing the spiral effect of what’s happening at lightning speed. Couple this with what you’re receiving from you, the demands from work, and promises made to your spouse. You have a recipe for disaster.

This social norm doesn’t happen overnight, nor does it have to happen at all. Let’s start by identifying some signs of caretaker burnout and then we’ll focus on solutions to improve the outcome for caregivers.

1. Are you withdrawing from friends, family and other loved ones? This is easier to spot when it’s not you, but go back the last six months and consider if your relationships have changed. Are you communicating with the people you love the most? Are you spending time with people you aren’t taking care of?

2. Do you participate in activities that you once enjoyed? When was the last time you went to see a movie, concert, play? Have you been out on a date with your significant other? Have you read a book that has nothing to do with a loved one’s illness or work-related? Are you exercising through play or a gym?

3. How is your mood? Are you showing signs of depression with feelings of hopelessness, irritability, sadness and/or wanting to hurt yourself? Have your sleep patterns changed? How is your appetite?

4. Are you exhausted? Whether physically, emotionally or spiritually what is the state of your energy and strength?

5. How is your health? It’s common for those exhibiting the above signs to have a weakened immune system. How often have you been getting sick this year? Is there a cold you just can’t kick? Has a serious medical issue affected you?

Thinking about taking any time for yourself when you’re immersed in a caretaker role could feel just as overwhelming as the job(s) you’re already doing. Realistically, where do you find the time for yourself when it’s all used up on others? The answer is that you have to! Remember the saying, “If you don’t care for yourself, you’re no good for those you’re caring for.” Here are some tools to consider to prevent or reverse caretaker burnout.

1. Talk about what’s going on! Find a friend, family member, caregiver support group and/or therapist to talk about your emotional state, experiences, challenges, burdens and stress. Expressing yourself to others can reduce your feelings of loneliness, anger, sadness and more.

A support group or therapist can also provide additional resources to help you through the more challenging times.

2. Use respite care services. Take an hour or two a few times a week to go back to what’s normal to you by using these temporary care services. Or, take a vacation by using this service once a week or two at a time. It’s temporary for your parent, but long-term for your mental state. In the Flathead, most assisted living and skilled nursing facilities will offer this service. Visit and see. It’s also a good way to test environments to see if they work for more permanent changes.

3. Be realistic. Educate yourself about the illness and set manageable goals. Know what to expect if your parent has a progressive disease. Know your limits and develop tools for coping, including finding the support you need.

4. Your feelings are your feelings. There is nothing to be ashamed of for feeling anger or frustration. This doesn’t make you a bad person or caregiver.

5. Get to know your resources. The United Way Answer Book is a great guide to the resources in the Flathead Valley. WebMD and Mayo Clinic also provide great information on nearly any disease or illness known to man.

6. Know the goals. Ask your parents what their goals are and help them achieve them if you can. Recognize your own goals and accept them if you can.

In closing, I must reiterate that you’re not alone. Try to share your burdens with other loved ones so the little you do harbor becomes a blessing of time with your elderly parents.