

Being a better caregiver

By Nancy Walbridge
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One of the bittersweet aspects of senior life is sometimes having to take care of someone dear to us when their health fades. Not since we were young parents ourselves have we had to contend with the dependency, demands, stress, and yes, joys, of being someone else's primary caregiver. Along with the obligations comes a little sweetness; these experiences offer the opportunity to dote on loved ones and put a lifetime of loving and devotion into action that can bring people closer than we realized was possible.

Seniors are often in the position of having to be the primary caregiver for a spouse in declining health or an adult child suffering a debilitating illness. Other times we support a caregiver, such as an adult child, who is caring for their spouse or other loved one. Either way, knowing how to be an effective caregiver can help both you and your loved one get more out of the time you spend together - and help keep the stress from undermining a loving relationship.

Most seniors know how to provide loving care when it is needed, but often forget to take care of themselves. It is easy to overextend, which can result in feelings of isolation, exhaustion, and being overwhelmed. We can be so committed to providing the best care possible that we believe taking even a little time for ourselves is selfish and irresponsible - when exactly the opposite is true. Just as an athlete cannot perform at his or her peak without

some rest on the sidelines, caregivers cannot do their best to help their loved one without taking a little time to catch their breath.

An occasional respite restores energy, eases stress, and reminds caregivers what life is

about. Rest also enhances care by countering burnout. As one devoted wife said, "I can't take care of my husband if I don't take care of me."

Here are a few suggestions to help make the experience of being a primary caregiver more positive, and more rewarding than you might expect.

First, plan for occasional "time off." Little things like a few hours in the garden, going into town to do a few errands or attending church can restore the spirit and sense of purpose and well being. Your loved one will recognize that you are feeling better, which will make him or her feel better too.

Second, find someone to talk with. Sharing your feelings, thoughts and fears with someone you trust can help you find perspective, focus on what's important, and let go of annoyances that really don't mean much. Others who know us can often see things that we have difficulty recognizing.

Talk about the important things. Learning to say things like "thank you," "I love you," "I'm sorry," and "I forgive you" can make a great difference in the quality of life for both you and your loved one - and they bring you closer. Enjoy humor and laughter: There is little that restores happiness better. Creating an environment in which openness and honesty can thrive

is often liberating.

Don't try to do everything yourself. By encouraging other family members to participate in caring for your loved one, you can actually reduce tension and jealousies and bring everyone closer and help them feel less isolated. Children and pets can lift spirits like nothing else!

At Hospice of the Rapidan, we provide compassionate and dignified end-of-life care for terminally ill patients, their caregivers, and loved ones in Culpeper, Fauquier, Madison, Orange and Rappahannock Counties, regardless of ability to pay. While we typically care for patients and families during the last six months of life, we offer a wide range of resources to help caregivers at all stages cope with the demands of providing loving care, maintain their sanity and humor, and find unexpected joy in the process.

We are experts in caregiving and managing the sometimes complicated family dynamics that accompany caring for a loved one who is no longer fully self sufficient.

The most frequent comment we hear from caregivers is that they waited too long before seeking help from hospice or other sources. To make our assistance more accessible, Aging Together, a leading regional partnership focusing on issues relating to seniors and our communities, will offer free caregiving workshops led by a member of our staff. For more information call Valarie Diamond at 540-825-4840.

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Knowing how to be an effective caregiver can help both you and your loved one get so much out of the time you spend together - and help keep the stress from undermining a loving relationship just when it is so important.



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