

THE JOYS OF CAREGIVING

CARING FOR AGING LOVED ONES NEED NOT BE A CRISIS

by Caroline Tapp-McDougall



A friend is 83 years old and his eyes are beginning to fail him. He refuses to stop driving even though we've suggested that he's no longer safe on the road. A month ago, as he was driving to the drugstore to pick up some medicine, he drove through a stop sign and nearly struck a pedestrian. After a chat with the family doctor, his license was suspended. Now, family members find themselves driving him everywhere. It's really-time consuming, and he's not happy.

Eldercare and its inherent responsibilities are the new facts of life for the invincible baby boomers. For 70 per cent of Canadians aged 30-60 today, looking after a parent is a reality – many of our elders are living approximately one-third longer than previous generations.¹ Many social researchers predict that caring for family members will be one of the most significant issues affecting family life over the next few decades. For so many individuals, their parents' and their own golden years will arrive like a storm, bringing inherent disruptions to daily life and work. This need not be the case.

A sudden crisis and the need for emergency planning will rack up financial and emotional costs quite quickly. The solution? Early research and planning for both short- and long-term eldercare needs. In the end, some sons and daughters decide to leave work and stay home to provide care. Others hire outside help. Each situation is as different as the people involved.

Accepting the challenge

Whether its roll-up-your-sleeves daily care or long-distance hands-off management, each family's eldercare situation will be different. If we choose to care, the common factor is that daily life becomes harder to juggle. However, with the right approach, it is possible to find joy in caregiving and still enjoy time spent with older loved ones. Learning the ropes and navigating through health, rehab and lifestyle options will become an adult child's new pastime—and, unfortunately, their stress barometer.

Caring at home

Most older adults prefer to remain at home alone, yet their ability to be independent and the type of assistance they need, and agree to, will change over time. Assessing a

THE FACTS ON CAREGIVING

Over **1.7 million** adults aged 45 to 64 provide informal care to almost **2.3 million** seniors with long-term disabilities or physical limitations. • Three-quarters of hours spent assisting seniors are by family members. • **70 per cent** of informal caregivers are also employed in the labour market. • Median hours per week spent by caregivers is two with women spending three hours and men spending **1.6** hours. • **44 per cent** of female caregivers and **27 per cent** of male caregivers are classified as high-intensity caregivers. • **53 per cent** of employed high-intensity female caregivers and **44 per cent** of male caregivers believe flex-time at work would help ease their burden. • Caregivers consistently have higher life satisfaction ratings than non-caregivers.

SOURCE: Statistics Canada

senior's needs can be a hard and subjective task, especially when the older person resists care. Nonetheless, examining activity levels and watching for poor eating habits, declining mobility, forgetfulness or poor personal hygiene are good places to start. For example, what happens if a neighbour living alone falls? In this case, encouraging the person to obtain a personal emergency response system (PERS), which can be programmed to call for help in the case of a fall or another emergency, can be a lifesaver.

“Are they living ‘at risk’?”

When assessing, a caregiver can ask, “Is your elder able to answer the door, stay alone, or manage cooking, shopping or driving?” Is the senior unsteady on his or her feet and reluctant to use a walker? Is forgetting to turn off the stove or lock the door an issue? Sometimes a simple solution, such as a home-support worker to help Mom with bathing or to drive Dad to the doctor can be helpful. Other times, a referral to an adult daycare program will be needed.

Each province and territory has a home-care program that can be accessed through the family doctor, and this is a good place to start looking for help. Occupational therapists are another great resource for evaluating home safety. (Remember, most falls occur in the bathroom.) And geriatric care managers (often privately paid), social workers and hospital discharge planners are others sources of knowledge and referrals.

Balancing responsibilities

As the number of us reaching the age of 65 will more than double over the next 20 years,² there will be increased absenteeism for family reasons and higher levels of personal stress at work. Employers will worry that we'll come to work with our parents' needs on our mind or face on-the-job interruptions with calls from elders. We'll need time off for caregiving and for our own medical conditions related to caregiver fatigue and depression. To keep working well, we'll need to find ways to ask for employment packages with accommodations that will allow us to care while staying on the payroll.³

Staying on the job

Fortunately, many employers are recognizing the value of keeping skilled employees on the job. (Providing for family caregivers is an emerging trend in the workplace.) Ideas that have worked well are lunch-and-learn sessions on eldercare and caregiving, and the formation of caregiver support groups at work. Some innovative companies have even opened adult daycare centres where employees can drop off their parents for the day, just like they do with their children.

Avoiding burnout

There's much at stake as families land in what's called the “eldercare gap”: The white space where we struggle and need help. In crisis mode, the downtime and instability are costly, and quality of care may be compromised. In stable mode, long-term care for parents over time includes the risk of burnout, resignation and on-the-job personal injury. To avoid burnout, eat well and get physically active. By building your physical and emotional strength, you'll be strong and clear-headed enough to battle negative thoughts and to be able to take charge. Find ways to think ahead, scout out available resources, and recognize and understand your elder's wishes. The caregiving journey – and your family life – will be that much smoother.

sources

- 1 Romanow, R. (2002). Building on Values: The Future of Health Care in Canada. Retrieved February 20, 2007 from <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/care/romanow/hcc0086.html>
- 2 Statistics Canada. (February 2007.) A portrait of seniors in Canada. p. 152-169. Catalogue No. 89-519-XIE
- 3 Pyper, W. (November 2006). Balancing career and care. *Perspectives on Labour and Income*. Vol. 7, No. 1. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

WORKPLACE WARNING CALL

You may have eldercare issues if you are

- taking extra personal phone calls related to elders
- not completing or decreasing the quality of your work
- unwilling to work overtime or handle business travel
- calling in sick or taking time off to provide support or care
- being late or adjusting schedules without notice
- distracted (and therefore at risk of on-the-job injury)
- unable to accept extra projects or new assignments
- avoiding issues at work
- requesting reduced hours when work is busy
- feel worn out, depressed or tense

SURVIVING ELDERCARE

Check out these 10 eldercare survival tips that'll improve your stamina and make things easier for you:

1. **Play the hand you're dealt:** Accept the fact that your parent needs you and decide whether you intend to be there for him or her. Come to terms with your situation and strive to make the best of it.
2. **Think positive:** Never underestimate the power of a positive outlook. Listen to yourself to catch negative comments. Things won't seem so desperate when you look to the brighter side.
3. **Make things happen:** Refuse to let your present situation wreak havoc for the rest of your life. Initiate changes for the better.
4. **Set goals:** Be realistic and clear about what needs to be done and what you can manage. Set goals in conjunction with your parents and health-care professionals.
5. **Prioritize:** Decide what's important and how much time you're prepared to spend on each area of your life. Choose whether your role is to achieve short-term stability in your parents' life or to accept a longer-term and more significant caregiving role.
6. **Ask for help:** Don't do it all yourself. Sharing caring responsibilities with family members or health-care professionals will reduce the load.
7. **Overcome your fear:** Sudden responsibilities can be draining and may require new skills. Try not to be overwhelmed. Be organized, take one step at a time, and recognize and respect your parents' rights, including the right to live at risk.
8. **Be good to yourself:** Treat yourself well and you'll have the inner strength to better care for others. This includes taking respite, fitness and wellness breaks.
9. **Watch what you eat and respect your body:** Ensure your body is up to the task. Remember to eat three balanced meals a day, including five servings of fruits and vegetables a day. Also, drink eight to 10 glasses of water a day and be sensible with alcohol.
10. **Live for today:** Don't sap your energy fretting about your parents' loss of strength, independence or vitality. Put your energy into finding new ways to enjoy each day.