

What you need to know when you are the family Caregiver

By Kate McCarthy

Providing care for an elderly loved one feels like the right thing to do. Often family members grow into the role of Caregiver as their aging parents need more and more help. A bit of yard work in the fall, help with spring cleaning, driving to doctor appointments and weekly trips to the supermarket are easy to accommodate and most families are happy to have the opportunity to help. It is when the need for help becomes daily or reaches a point when your elderly loved one isn't safe living on their own any longer,



Knowing what to expect can make it easier.

that families need to make some hard decisions. Families will often slide into becoming their loved one's full time Caregiver and then they find themselves providing care for their own young family and their aging parents.

The Sandwich Generation

A term coined by Carol Abaya in the early 1990's, the Sandwich Generation describes those in their 50s or 60s who are sandwiched providing care for their aging parents and their adult children and grandchildren. It is a challenging time period for these people as they have demands on their energy and resources from everyone in their family. Many start out enthusiastic and excited about being able to give back to the one who had raised them, only to become burned out and bitterly disappointed at how their relationships, quality of life and energy levels have been destroyed.

For those who decide to take on the many responsibilities and demands of becoming the Caregiver for their aging loved ones, there are some basic tips which might make providing care easier

Know that you will have to make hard choices

Many don't realize when they start out as family Caregivers that they are now have taken on the responsibility to make another person's decisions. Many times this makes the Caregiver the least favorite person in the family. Having to decide on an endless list of health care issues, finances and quality of life decisions can be exhausting, but it is often compounded by your loved one not agreeing with what you think is best. Siblings often add their 2 cents making basic decisions a multi-leveled negotiation. Many elderly will resist getting input into major decisions believing their independence is being infringed on. Often they are slow to consider the options and will put making any type of choice permanently on hold. It is frustrating for those who provide care to be patient and respectful especially when deadlines are looming.

It is wise to have major decisions already determined before they become an issue. Sit down with your aging loved one and discuss how they want their affairs handled long before they can no longer manage themselves. Your loved ones can set up directives early which will take the pressure off of you to decide for them later in life. Life is much easier when medical directives are in place, the will has been made, Power of Attorney for finances and health are set up and end-of-life choices have been decided.

Know that caring for an elderly parent is not like caring for a child

Remember that your aging loved one has lived an entire life before you even came into existence, so treating them as if they were another child is disrespectful and demeaning. Expect there will be times when their behavior is as stubborn as a toddler's, but do not respond as you would to a child. Instead try to find out what is going on and give them the time to discuss their concerns and fears. Do not expect your loved one to easily adapt to your schedule and ways of doing things. They are probably pretty set in their ways and have every right to be so. Also remember that they crave adult interaction and need to be included in your family's normal life and activities, even if doing so requires a lot of extra effort on your part. The last thing you want is to have them feel as if their presence is a burden and that they are isolated and lonely and just taking up space in your home.

Know that providing care can be uncomfortably embarrassing

Understand that as your loved ones continue to age, their need for assistance with personal care will increase. This can cause embarrassment for both generations. Helping with showering, dressing and toileting can be weird for the adult children of

aging parents, but after a few times it will feel less awkward. Trouble with incontinence and loss of body functions can make everyone cringe and for some it is just easier on relationships to have a professional Caregiver come in a couple times a week to help with personal cares.

Know that providing care will affect your other relationships

Being a Caregiver is a very demanding job. It requires a servant's heart at all times and usually without any recognition or thanks. Most often it is the women in the family who take on this role in addition to all their other duties and responsibilities. Being stretched to the limit, the family Caregiver will find relationships on all sides bearing the brunt of frustrations, exhaustion and weariness. Interaction between the aging parents and adult children can become strained, as well relationships with everyone else in the family. People often imagine having multi generations under the same roof will be wonderful, especially for the younger children. They fail to realize that the aging have limited tolerance for noise and commotion and would prefer some space from the younger members of the family.

Know that doctors are interested in prolonging life, not the quality of life

Doctors will be a primary source of information and help as your loved one's health needs increase. They are kind, caring and committed to your loved one's well being, but their main concern is dealing with the physical concerns that prolong life. This most likely will result in more and more prescriptions for medications, endless office visits and lots of tests. As the family Caregiver, your job will be to facilitate the doctor orders, to manage the medications and interface between physicians. It will fall on you to become your loved one's advocate for health care concerns. Yet your primary concern should be about making the final years and months comfortable and enjoyable. Most elderly are far more concerned about quality of life over longevity and if often falls on the family Caregiver to ensure the quality of life through social interaction, conversation, easy projects and just being there to listen.

Know that you will need help

Being a family Caregiver can be difficult and stressful, especially when providing care for an aging loved one is sandwiched in with all the other demands of life. While in the midst of providing care, life can get so busy that it is difficult to see the toll that it takes on your energy, relationships and family. Most families eventually realize that they need help. Finding a professional Caregiver to come into the home a couple times a

week makes an enormous difference. Respite Care is another option that allows family Caregiver to get away and unwind.

Families often naively believe that they can provide care for their aging loved ones with minimal stress or strain on their lives. Since the end goal is enjoying a close and loving relationship with their aging loved ones, knowing what to expect can make it easier for avoid stressful problems for the entire family.



HomeAid Health Care
Helping Hands at Home

Kate McCarthy is Director of Operations for HomeAid Health Care which provides services for the elderly who wish to remain safe and independent at home. HomeAid is sister company to Prairie Home Assisted Living which has served the physical, spiritual, mental and health needs of their residents since 1999. Together the two companies provide comprehensive care for the elderly in the Fox Valley area of Wisconsin.