

Self-Care for the Family Caregiver

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Living in a senior (55+) living community gives me many opportunities to witness spouses taking care of their ailing mates, children taking care of sick parents, and friends whose spouses are in hospice care. These observations led me to think about the question of self-care for the family caregiver and its importance. The following is a result of times of thinking, praying, and pondering on this matter.

Taking care of your own family member who has special needs is different from hiring someone to do so. The hired caregiver's relationship with the person creates a different dynamic and does not trigger some of the struggles that family caregivers experience. The issue of self-care for the one who is taking care of a needy relative becomes a necessary matter for family members to think about.

Why is self-care important for the caregiver?

1. A family caregiver is only human and has needs that must be addressed and met in order to live healthily. Accepting one's limitations is an important first step toward the road to developing healthy self-care habits while caring for others.
2. The ailing family member needs the caregiver, so the caregiver has to be healthy all around in order to provide the care needed.

The emotional toll of family caregiving

1. Personal desires may need to be laid aside for the sake of the ailing family member.
2. The needs of other family members may be sacrificed for the ailing family member.
3. The relationship among family members may become complicated and fraught with tension due to differing ideas regarding how to provide care and expectations of each other.
4. Anger and frustration can frequently occur while caring for the ailing family member, especially with those who are strong-willed and uncooperative.
5. Isolation due to the demands of caregiving may deepen loneliness on the caregiver's part.
6. Lack of rest and sleep can make daily challenges overwhelming.

How to practice self-care

1. Respite - you cannot do caregiving alone! You need times away to refresh and recover from the stresses of caregiving. Respite may take the form of having other family members take turns helping, asking the church family for help, or having a hired caregiver cover for times when you need a break.
2. Take care of your physical needs. Healthy eating, exercise, sleep, and rest need to be protected and be a part of your routine and lifestyle. Long-term neglect can make you sick and unable to continue taking care of your loved one needing care.
3. Learn better communication skills and attempt to communicate well with other family members. Use open communication, even asking a counselor or pastor to help mediate, if needed, when family tensions arise.
4. Accept that feelings of anger, frustration, guilt, and desperation are all part of what happens in caregiving.
5. Counter the natural push to isolate. Keep in touch with close friends, have a few confidants that you can call on, go to church, and join a fellowship group as often as you can get away.

6. Have your confidants be your sounding board. Yet, be careful not to repeatedly complain about the same things as complaining may worsen any feelings of despair and helplessness if unchecked. This suggestion is based on research that has shown that too much complaining about the same thing increases a person's negativity rather than relieves him or her of the stress.
7. Develop the habit of gratitude. Count your blessings and look for rays of sunlight in the difficult situation. Gratitude is now considered one of the best ways to counter depression and hopelessness.
8. Develop activities and hobbies together with the ailing family member that you both can enjoy! For example, a wife taking care of her husband with advanced Parkinson's might take her husband to the gym, put him on an exercise machine and help him start exercising. Then she could jump onto a machine next to him and do her own exercises. Or an ailing spouse loves to play scrabble, so the caregiver plays scrabble with her. Share spiritual insights with each other and enjoy worshipping the Lord together. In other words, make caregiving more fun by seeing the ailing spouse as a partner in fun, spiritual growth, and worship.
9. Take care of your spiritual needs. Only the Lord can provide you the extra strength and grace to truly keep the flow of love going as one cares for a loved one. Your relationship with God is the most important part of being able to keep on giving to someone else. Personal quiet retreats, daily devotions, and encouragement from your church family are all important in order to gain strength to serve.
10. Listen to quality soothing music, whether classical or religious, as these will help calm you and the one you care for.

The lack of time and the demanding nature of caregiving are reasons that many people would say that none of the above suggestions can work. However, one needs to consider that if these suggestions are not in place in one's life, one's ability to provide long-term quality caregiving is seriously hampered. This means that somehow, there has to be a prioritizing of self-care not only for one's own sake, but actually for the sake of the one needing you to be healthy! Without self-care one cannot be a good caregiver and the emotional toll will be greater on both the caregiver and the one being cared for. Having healthy self-care habits will make the difference between who survives and thrives as a caregiver and who burns out.

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