

# A New Year and A New Role

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*“There are only four kinds of people in this world—those who have been caregivers, those who currently are caregivers, those who will be caregivers and those who need caregivers.” Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter*

At some point in our lives we'll all be challenged with the role of care-giving in some form or another. For anyone who's a newly assigned caregiver, it may not have been a role you wanted to take on. Sometimes you're thrust into it overnight. Other times it's crept up so subtly you don't even realize how your role has been transformed. What may have started out with a few responsibilities has turned into a full-time job. Before you even realize it you're bearing most of the weight of caring for your loved one. It's a new role for you. You've become an advocate, nurse, guardian, cook, companion, maid, safety officer, chauffeur, maintenance & repair person, social worker, activities director and pharmacist without even remembering signing up. Now with the start of a new year, you're facing the daunting task of being everything to your loved one.

What's challenging is how to embrace this new role and maintain a piece of yourself in the process. How do you juggle your million other obligations that are all competing for your time? Each role you live out demands more and more energy. And the role of caregiver can be the most stressful one you'll ever take on.

Here's a fact: 63% of caregivers will die before the person they're caring for. Why? Because it's downright exhausting! The truth is care-giving can be hazardous to your health if you don't take care of yourself **first**. Yes, **FIRST!** It's a radical concept to put yourself first before others, especially if you're a woman. But it's the only way to avoid running yourself ragged and literally into the ground. Also consider this: nearly one-third of adult children caregivers will show signs of depression after one year of care-giving. Is this where you want to be when ringing in the New Year 2011? Think of the message flight attendants give before lift-off. In the event of an emergency, you're asked to place the own oxygen mask over your face first and then help those around you. You have to care for yourself first before you can effectively care for others.

So as you start this New Year, understand your role as caregiver will constantly evolve over the course of the next twelve months. It will become a new role each time it changes and each time you're expected to put on another 'hat'. You'll be met with new challenges, new experiences, and new questions. Quite simply, expect the unexpected. But you'll be prepared with a bit of pre-planning. The start of this New Year can help you refocus and regroup. How do you want to take care of yourself in 2010?

Here are some suggestions: Take out your calendar and mark off days just for you—one day a week minimum. Plan ahead and make a date with yourself. If it's important today, it should be important later especially when the unexpected pops up. Keep those dates with yourself. For those days off, hire someone or ask someone to relieve you. It's a short time frame and you'll get the respite without the guilt.

Divide up the responsibilities—your role as caregiver doesn't have to include EVERYTHING. Sometime you need to give up the control to someone else and let others help out. It's okay to ask for help... make that your New Year's Resolution.

Write up a list of limitations for yourself before you start out the year. Decide what you're willing to take on and what you aren't when caring for your loved one. Then when those situations arise (and they will) you'll know healthy boundaries for yourself. You can ask for the appropriate help and come out a better person without resentment, guilt and frustration.

And remember, this too shall pass—the good and the not-so-good you encounter in your role are only temporary. Sometimes you have to say 'tomorrow will be a better day' even if you hear yourself saying it for the next 364 days.

Caring for yourself may be a whole new mindset and only you can embrace it and take the necessary steps to prevent caregiver burnout. You have to do it for yourself. Care-giving is not easy and you may not have even wanted this unexpected 'career'. But care-giving can be a fulfilling and rewarding experience for those who embrace their role without sacrificing themselves in the process.

So for 2010 live out your role as caregiver as well as you can. But more importantly, live out your role as SELF the best you can.

***Caregiver's Corner*** is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at [www.CaregiverResource.net](http://www.CaregiverResource.net) or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.