

# EMBRACING CHANGE

by Hanni Epp, MA, LLP

**“It was midnight when I got to bed last night. After only three hours, I was wide-awake, thinking I had heard a noise, and wondering if Mom had fallen out of bed. After checking on her, my mind was in full gear with thoughts of the day to come; take car for oil change, pay bills, schedule conference with teacher. As my mind kept racing, so did my heart. I began to panic – maybe I was having a heart attack! I don’t have time for that. Who would fill in for me at work? Who would drive the children to and from school? Where will the money come from to pay Mom’s medical expenses? Who would deal with Mom’s moods? I don’t even recognize my life anymore. Please help!” -- Elizabeth D.**

## About Elizabeth. . .

Elizabeth, aged 43, is married to Frank, a supervisor in a furniture factory, and is the mother of two active teenagers, Kayla and Benjamin. She works as a manager of a small children’s toy store, and enjoys her job. One of the benefits has been that she has been able to schedule her hours around her family’s needs, for the most part. When Elizabeth’s mother suffered a stroke two years ago, she came to live with Elizabeth and her family. It seemed like the best way to manage overseeing her mother’s care, and cutting expenses.

Daily life has certainly changed for Elizabeth and her family: it is busier, more complex, more everything, it seems. With scheduling for five people, financial struggles and emotional upsets to cope with, no wonder Elizabeth is asking for help.

## What Elizabeth Needs to Know

Often, we use the words change and transition interchangeably. According to William Bridges, author of *Managing Transitions*, the two terms have important differences:

- *Change* happens around and outside of you, such as Elizabeth’s Mom moving in with her.

- *Transition* happens inside of you – it's your own internal process for dealing with and accepting change.

Think how it feels to cross a wide stream using stepping-stones. Before each step, you worry about losing your footing and getting wet. Sure enough, some of the stones wobble a little. But you focus on your position and manage to steady yourself and regain your balance. Just so, you maneuver your way through the transitions that mark caregiving.

Caregiving by its very nature creates change and transition, especially in relationships – affecting everyone involved; caregiver, care receiver, other family members and close friends, to start with. Life means constant changes and, therefore, constant transitions. Instead of fighting them, I suggest you embrace them.

### **What Are the Issues?**

First, there is the scheduling for Elizabeth and for the family. Besides just getting to and from school, the children are very involved in extracurricular activities, and while car-pooling helps, there is still a lot of driving. Mom has numerous medical and personal appointments, and is no longer able to drive. Plus, Mom needs help with some of her care. And that doesn't include Elizabeth and Frank's work and household schedules!

Then there are the finances. Business has been slow for Frank, and his hours have been cut, so he has taken a part-time job to supplement. Mom has been using her Social Security check to help with expenses. While the children's activities are costly, the more significant expense of college education is coming soon. Closer at hand are the Medicare Drug Changes. The family doesn't know yet what that will mean for them, but Mom's medications are expensive, and it's worrisome.

With so many changes occurring at once, it's been hard for Elizabeth to take time to process and prepare for the transitions. Everyone is struggling to regain their equilibrium. The

children have fussed about needing more help with homework, and been disappointed when their parents have not attended some of their school activities. Mom is often moody and tends to make Elizabeth feel guilty. Elizabeth and Frank are always tired, with no time for each other, much less the friends they've enjoyed for years. They are feeling overwhelmed.

### **What's next...?**

Elizabeth and her family need to learn to focus on the present moment. A friend of mine often reminds me of the 97% rule: 97% of the time we worry about things that happen only 3% of the time. This only takes energy away from our ability to be effective in the present.

The family may all have some fears that are unsettling and may make them feel out of control. Here are some questions from a Caregiver's Checklist on Coping from the book And Thou Shalt Honor, to help pinpoint the problem areas.

- Exactly what is changing?
- What bothers me about this change?
- How are other family members reacting to this change?
- Which aspects of this change must be dealt with now, and which can wait until later?
- What has not been affected by this change?
- What are the benefits of this change?
- How can I make this change more tolerable, even pleasurable?

Notice that the questions ask the family to look at the upside of change, too. As each change is instituted, it may free up time to address some other issue causing stress. By stepping back, asking questions and seeking answers, Elizabeth and her family will feel more in control of their situation and be able to embrace needed changes, keeping their transition on track.

The family is also asked to recognize that Mom may still be able to do a lot on her own – like calling a cab occasionally to go to a beauty salon appointment, or hitching a ride with a

friend to the senior center. She may in fact prefer to make these arrangements on her own, without intervention from others.

Resistance to change is natural and normal. We don't want the things we are familiar with and enjoy taken away from us. Don't let that happen! For example, if Mom loves ice cream and can no longer eat dairy products, I suggest the family find those delicious fruit sherbets in the store and bring them home for a treat.

Financial worries often keep people awake, especially caregivers. They worry about possible crises, about future care, and they worry about prescription drug costs. With Medicare Drug Changes looming, Elizabeth and Frank are concerned that they will face additional out of pocket expenses for Mom's medication.

Again, the best way to relieve worry about the unknown is to gather more information. The local Senior Neighbors Center has a Prescription Assistance program to help people understand Medicare. To locate the Senior Center nearest them, Elizabeth can call the Senior Neighbor's main office telephone number at (616) 459-6019.

There is also a statewide toll-free telephone number to call Michigan Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program (MMAAP), which will also provide information on Medicare and its changes. That number is 800-803-7174.

For some additional information and ideas, see the Tips on Medicare Drug Changes by Jo Murphy of The Area Agency on Aging, elsewhere in this issue of *Mature Lifestyles*. Also, check out last month's *Mature Lifestyles* for the Caregiver's Corner article on Spirituality and Caregiving.

### **Last thoughts...**

Caregiving presents many opportunities for change and for transition. Some happen so quickly you can hardly remember what it was like "before", some happen more slowly, giving

you time to accept and adapt.

Often, I hear people longing for life to be “normal” again. The truth is that changes and transitions *are* normal; we’ve been going through them since birth. Remember getting a driver’s license or graduating from high school, just to name a few? Caring for a loved one hasn’t yet achieved the same recognition as other rites of passage, but it too is another marker on life’s journey.

Consider how many changes and transitions you have made over the years. Each time, you’ve sought and found a new equilibrium. You can put that experience to good use now, as you move through your role as caregiver. You will see how you can best attend to your family relationships, and care for yourself as you move forward into the future.

## **References:**

[www.caregiver.ca](http://www.caregiver.ca)

[www.lib.uchicago.edu](http://www.lib.uchicago.edu)

[www.tenderheartscaregiving.org](http://www.tenderheartscaregiving.org)

[www.uhfnyc.org](http://www.uhfnyc.org)

And Thou Shalt Honor: The Caregiver’s Companion. Rodale Publishers. 2002. Ed. McLeod, B.W.

## **More resources**

If you want more information about resources, the Caregiver Resource Network can help. The Network’s web page ([www.caregiverresource.net](http://www.caregiverresource.net)) can provide you with information about programs and services, fact sheets, and a questionnaire about caregiver strain. Or call Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (616) 456.5664, or (888) 456.5664.

If you have a question you would like to see addressed in a future article, feel free to contact Hanni Epp at: Caregiver’s Corner, West Michigan Caregivers Alliance, 233 E. Fulton, Ste. 222, Grand Rapids, MI 49503, or e-mail at [Hanni@wmichcare.com](mailto:Hanni@wmichcare.com).

Column written by Hanni Epp, MA, LLP, therapist and consultant in private practice at West Michigan Caregivers Alliance. Hanni is also a member of Caregiver Resource Network, a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing information and support for family and professional caregivers within the community. Be sure to look for the Caregiver’s Corner in the next edition of *Mature Lifestyles*.