

Caregiver's Corner Column (July 2015)

Making Peace with Your Decisions

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Adult Well Being Services

“I was so exhausted and overwhelmed.” “I didn’t have enough help and I was ashamed to admit I needed it.” “I no longer had a life of my own, and I couldn’t take it anymore.” These are often the thoughts and feelings of caregivers that are struggling with their decision of placing their loved one in a long-term care facility. The majority of caregivers are parents, spouses, partners, sons, and daughters of the person who needs assistance and are typically not “trained” medical professionals. Over time the scope of care needs becomes more demanding and complex, often extending beyond the abilities of those providing the care. Coming to the realization that it is time to make the transition to a skilled nursing home is extremely difficult, causing the caregiver painful feelings of loss, failure, and guilt. These emotions are a normal response to the situation. In order to move forward into this new phase with a loved one, it is important to acknowledge these feelings and explore ways to cope with them while continuing to have a close and loving relationship.

Guilt arises when you feel forced to make choices that contradict what you wish you “could do”, or think you “should do.” Caregivers often berate themselves for having to place their loved one in a nursing home. Remember the decision to change their living situation was not one you arrived at easily or quickly, it was an action that was lovingly and carefully thought out. Often these decisions are a necessity due to emergent circumstances or serious health concerns where professional care is required for the safety and comfort of your loved one. This does not mean you have given up on being a caregiver. You will still be an important part of their care team by participating as an advocate in overseeing their care. Partner with the facility staff by sharing your knowledge of your loved one’s physical and emotional needs so they can provide the most beneficial and person-centered care. By letting go of the responsibility of being their primary caregiver you can return to being the parent, spouse, partner, son or daughter they love and need.

There is no easy remedy for caregiver guilt. It is an ongoing process that will continue as you both adjust to the new living arrangement. You will likely hear your loved one say that they hate it and they want to go home, or ask why they can’t live with you. This will tug at your heart and make you feel that you have let them down. Remember this transition came from the love you have for them, and from acknowledging your limits as a care provider. Their health and well-being was the basis for this decision. You will need to continually reiterate that truth. With this acceptance comes a greater ability to focus primarily on visiting with them at their new home, which will provide the opportunity to renew and strengthen your relationship. Make the most of your time together by engaging in meaningful activities. Providing a structured visit by planning activities in advance will reduce the anxiety for you and keep your loved one engaged. Some examples are; reading a book together, watching a movie, playing cards, working on a puzzle, creating a photo album, or simply reminiscing about funny stories and favorite memories. Most of all, just being present in their lives is the best way to express your love and affection. This will confirm to your loved one that they continue to be validated and valued. As a caregiver, recognize that you have continually made courageous decisions and personal sacrifices to protect your loved one. When feelings of guilt surface, remember to trust in your decisions, be kind to yourself, and find peace and comfort in knowing that you are doing the best that 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 or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.