

Caregiver's Corner Column (February 2013)

When Spouses Become Caregivers

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Couples face unique challenges as one begins caregiving for the other. This is because of the change in the relationship, as well as the corresponding routine and expectations placed upon the individuals. Sometimes these roles change rapidly because of a sudden accident or debilitating health incident, or other times it is a slow process as the care recipient declines with chronic disease or degeneration. Either way, it is a threat to relational patterns that have been established for years for many couples. Both individuals are forced to adapt to accommodate a modified life as a couple. This frequently requires the caregiver to fulfill duties that the care recipient once accomplished and adds to his or her escalating stress levels. For instance, Betty may now have to learn how to maintain the lawn mower, or John might struggle with preparing meals after their spouse had done these things most of their lives. As for the care recipient, it is often difficult to have to relinquish these tasks and there can be feelings of frustration and worthlessness.

Both the history of the relationship and the values of the individuals affect the caregiving experience. For example, a spouse who takes on the caregiving role out of duty or obligation may feel less fulfilled as opposed to someone who does so out of affection for the person. Also, caregivers who seem to have had a closer bond with their spouse seem to more effectively cope with the stressors of caring for them. Relationships that have a history of problems and have established negative patterns are more likely to decline further when faced with the struggles of failing health and greater need on the part of the care recipient.

A potential mediator of stress is the assistance from family members and the community. Home health aides, adult day care, and other community-based services are highly instrumental in lessening the load for the caregiving spouse. However, couples are often reluctant to accept this kind of help. It can be understandably difficult to enlist the help of strangers to play a role within their interrelationship and established routine. Because we as a society value independence and generally shy away from infirmity, it is hard entrusting strangers to respect and care for our loved ones in their most vulnerable moments. Couples often feel ashamed or embarrassed over their spouse's care needs or difficult behaviors. They may reject the notion that assistance is needed because of the stigma placed upon people who are dependent or sick. Guilt is also a common emotion among caregivers since they feel that they should be responsible for their spouse's care. He or she can worry that they are a disappointment to their loved one and that they are, in a sense, allowing a violation of familial confidentiality.

There are no easy answers for coping with the demands of caregiving among couples and the relational changes that have to be adapted to. When possible, active communication is very important to the well-being of the couple. While it may be true that the less sturdy relationships face the most challenges when infirmity occurs, this could also be a launching point for a more secure, devoted relationship. Being confronted with trauma or illness can lead people to realign priorities and view their relationships in a new light. If outside help becomes an option, it pays to look for people who are sensitive to the thoughts and unique needs of both the caregiver and care

recipient. When facing feelings such as shame, guilt, isolation, or grief, support groups provide an excellent opportunity to work through these feelings among peers who have similar experiences. A happier caregiver is a healthier one, possessing the tools necessary for a successful relationship amidst the roles and responsibilities of day to day caregiving.

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.