



## SENIOR CROSSROADS ...

*Pam Scott*

### The balancing act of being a family caregiver

Published on Tue, Feb 1, 2011

I don't consider myself a caregiver, I'm just helping my loved one.

Welcome to the world of unpaid family caregivers. Although you may not consider yourself to be a caregiver, you are a member of a very large club comprised of people with large and loving heart. At last estimate, there were more than 54 million people providing unpaid care for a family member or close friend (approximately 26.6 percent of the adult population).

Still don't consider yourself to be a caregiver? Think about this: Caregivers typically provide a loved one or friend with assistance such as shopping, bathing, dressing, grooming, meal preparation, housecleaning and transportation. They also might arrange for and oversee services such as home maintenance, paying bills or other such services. It's a very honorable club to be a member of — welcome.

#### Family and work and caregiving — oh my!

Outside the world of paid work, unpaid family caregivers are the most prone to burnout, particularly if they also are juggling their own family life and employment. That can make for a stressful full plate. And if the stress of caregiving progresses to burnout, it can damage your physical, mental and emotional well-being. Even the most successful juggling acts found in the circus and Vegas drop a ball sometimes, it's inevitable.

But where professional jugglers can just pick up the ball, laugh and start over, it's not that easy for the caregiver. When a ball drops in his or her life, many times the ramifications are far more pronounced. And when that ball drops, it's usually the first sign of caregiver burnout. Not only do caregivers need to recognize the signs and symptoms of burnout, it is essential that they get the support needed to help balance all of the demands and stress in their life. There are many tips, tools and organizations available to help the family caregiver better manage their juggling act.

#### Tips for family caregivers

While this list of tips isn't all-inclusive, it's a great starting point for finding better balance in your life. 1) take charge of your life by trying to not let your loved one's illness or disability always be the center of your universe; 2) determine your limits; 3) be good to yourself; take regular breaks — investigate respite and day care options; 4) watch for signs of depression, anxiety and health issues in yourself; 5) it's OK to accept help; 6) information is powerful — educate yourself about your loved one's condition; 7) explore technologies and ideas that can help promote your loved one's independence; 8) trust your instincts; 9) stand up for your rights as a caregiver and family member; and 10) remember — you can't help your loved one if your own life is in jeopardy.

Now, I realize that it is far easier for me to write these words than it can be for the family caregiver to practice them. Use these tips as a guide and a goal toward your own well-being and a better balance in your life and the life of your loved one.

#### Common warning signs of caregiver burnout

All too often caregivers are so caught up in the day-to-day tasks and daily routines that they don't realize they are heading for burnout until it's too late. It's imperative that caregivers pay attention to themselves and what their bodies are telling them and recognizing the signs that they are heading for burnout.

If you recognize any of these signs and symptoms, you are heading for or have reached caregiver burnout:

- 1) You have much less vim and vigor than you used to;
- 2) you have a diminished resistance to illnesses;
- 3) exhaustion has become a regular part of your life;
- 4) your own needs have been neglected either through lack of time or lack of energy;
- 5) caregiving has become the No. 1 focus in your life, even at the expense of your own family life, personal needs, and/or job;
- 6) even while trying to relax, you are thinking about caregiving;
- 7) you

become increasingly more impatient and irritable with not only the person you are caring for, but others around you and in your life; 8) you have feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and being overwhelmed; 9) you can't remember the last time you had a night out with your spouse, companion or friends; 10) you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The first strategy for preventing caregiver burnout is: Don't try to do it all alone. Taking on all of the responsibilities of caregiving without regular breaks or assistance is a surefire recipe for burnout. Once you burn out, caregiving is no longer a healthy option for either you or the person you are caring for. And if you reach the top rung of the burnout level, it's very difficult to climb your way back to solid ground. It's very important for a caregiver (or other family member) to know and recognize signs of caregiver burnout.

It is completely OK and acceptable for caregivers to acknowledge that they can't do it all and to step back to take some time to help repair and rejuvenate themselves.

## **Finding and accepting help and support**

Looking for, finding and accepting help is critical for a caregiver's well-being. Knowing where to start, however, can sometimes be a daunting task on its own. Here are some recommendations to get you started:

- Enlist friends and family who live near you to run errands, bring a hot meal or "respite-sit" the care receiver so you can take a well-deserved break.
- Check with the care receiver's insurance company(s); some companies will cover part of the cost of outside care services such as respite, day care or home care designed to give the primary caregiver a break.
- Contact local senior services organizations in your area such as Senior Information and Assistance, Area Agency on Aging offices, senior centers, and veteran services offices for assistance in finding available services.
- If you or your loved one is a member of a fraternal organization such as the VFW, Elks, Eagles, American Legion or Moose Lodge, they may be able to offer some assistance such as phone check-ins, home visits or transportation.
- If you or your loved one belongs to a church, many of them have members who volunteer to do home visits, chore visits, etc.
- Join a caregiver support group. Sometimes just knowing that you aren't alone in your feelings is a huge help. Being able to talk over your fears, issues and joys with others can take a load off of your shoulders. There also are legitimate Internet-based caregiver support groups available.
- Contact local senior living communities such as retirement, assisted living and memory care facilities. Many of them now offer respite stay and adult day services programs. They also can be a great source of information for additional resources that may be of benefit to you as well as your loved one. Home care agencies, physicians, hospital social workers, pharmacists, co-workers, neighbors and friends also can be a valuable resource. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

## **You owe it to yourself**

When you are a caregiver, finding time to nurture yourself might seem impossible. But you owe it to yourself to find the time. Without it you may not have the mental or physical strength to deal with all of the stress you experience as a caregiver.

Give yourself permission to rest and to do things that you enjoy on a daily basis. You will be a better caregiver for it.

Being a caregiver to a loved one can be a very difficult journey but at the same time it can be extremely rewarding.

But it isn't a journey that is suited for everyone for many different reasons. For those who step in to be that special someone — my hat is off to you. You have my utmost respect and admiration. Please take care of yourself and your life — you deserve it.

For more information and resource assistance, please e-mail Pam Scott at [info@discovery-mc.com](mailto:info@discovery-mc.com) or call 683-7047. Scott has many years of experience working with seniors and their families in skilled nursing, assisted living, transportation, and benefits. Scott is the Community Relations Director for Discovery Memory Care in Sequim.