

Caring Enough to Ask for Help

When you said, “I do” you meant it! “I will honor you...in sickness and in health.” And now, years later, you are doing your best, caring for you spouse at home in his (or her) time of sickness. But as the months (or years) go by, it is taking a toll on you. It’s hard to be patient. It’s difficult to keep giving up parts of your own life because you must always be there helping him. It’s hard to remain positive when your sleep is disturbed and the demands are increasing. Maybe you can’t do it anymore. But wait - I said “I do!” I must keep doing all I can to honor him in his sickness. I made a promise.

Caregivers often fall prey to thinking that doing all the work on their own somehow shows they love more, and that asking for help – having someone else provide care for awhile – means they have failed to be that loving spouse. But stop and think about this: placing your loved one in the hands of another caregiver – be it an adult day center, a home-care provider or a long term care facility – does not mean you have failed. It is not the end of your caregiving journey, either. Your loved one will need you until his time on earth is over. Your caregiving tasks will change from hands-on, physical care to emotional, social and spiritual companionship. Is it easy to ask for help? Personal experience tells me “no.”

My father spent his first day at the Adult Day Center last Friday. His memory loss began a couple years ago and my mom has struggled on this new, unplanned road. She has moved from being a wife and partner to being a caregiver. I’ve watched her come to terms with her new job of keeping dad safe and helping him with the daily tasks of life. Now, in addition to her lifelong homemaker duties, she is also in charge of finances, snow removal, car maintenance and she is the sole decision-maker of what goes on in their lives. She says that is one of the hardest things, having to make all the decisions by herself.

While visiting at Christmas time I was surprised to hear my mother bring up the local adult day center. I wasn’t sure she would be accepting of help “from outsiders.” I encouraged her idea and explained that creating time for herself while dad was safely being cared for would give her more patience, more time to complete the tasks she needed to get done, and would help her keep some of her own social outlets which are so important. She agreed. After a few phone calls and visits, it was all arranged. Now, to break the news to Dad.

I was there when she told him he’d be spending the day “at the nursing home,” visiting with Bob and Rudolph and some others there that he’s known for years. While he didn’t seem thrilled, he didn’t put up a fuss either. Mom stayed strong and the plan was in motion.

She called me last Friday, half-way through Dad’s first day away. She listed the things she had accomplished in the morning, and then told me her to-do list for the afternoon. When I talked to her the next day, she reported that the day was a success for both her and Dad. He had done fine in the new environment and Mom was feeling

refreshed and already looking forward to a day by herself the following week. Although there were a few bumps in the road, for the most part she was upbeat.

I am proud of my mom for looking past her desire to do it by herself and for seeing the necessity of self care for both her own sake and for Dad's benefit, too. I'm proud of the strength and courage it took for her to ask for help. And I'm proud of what a good caregiver she is for my dad. He's lucky to have her, and he knows it.

If you are struggling in your own caregiving situation, for a spouse, parent, friend or other relative, remember that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of wisdom and strength.

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