

MANAGING CAREGIVER GUILT

Guilt is a common feeling when it comes to Caregiving. Guilt comes in two flavors, it can either make you to be the best you can or it can immobilize you.

For caregivers, painful feelings — such as guilt, sadness and anger — are like any other pain. It's your body's way of saying, "Pay attention."

Feelings experienced by a caregiver

Many caregivers experience a wide range of feelings. The majority of caregivers willingly choose to play a primary role in the care of their loved one, this role often carries with it conflicting emotions that must be dealt with. Among them are:

Sadness and grief

Knowing that a person is in declining health and seeing it happen before your eyes can be extremely difficult. Realizing that a loved one is suffering is often very traumatic. Knowing that your husband, mother, sister, aunt or grandmother has a short time to live may cause you to begin grieving even before they die.

Fear and worry

Those of you who are taking care of someone in declining health may be plagued by fears. What will the future hold? How long will my loved one live? What happens if my loved one needs more care than I can provide them? What if something happens to me? How do I get extra help that I need? What if it becomes a financial burden on me? Will I be able to hold on to my job or will they let me go? Will I have to quit? What if they need to be placed in a nursing home?

Anger

Dealing with a loved one who is ill can be very frustrating. Illness can affect people differently and some will lash out at you due to their own fear, frustration, and growing dependency on you as the caregiver. You as the caregiver may need deal with your own anger; anger at the person you are caring for, at having to be the primary caregiver, at family members who may not be helping out, or at the doctors.

Guilt

The caregiver may feel guilty about many things, including guilt for not doing enough to change this situation or make the person happier, guilt for becoming angry with your loved one that you are caring for and you maybe feeling guilty for neglecting your own spouse, children, yourself and other responsibilities. You may even feel guilty for enjoying time away from the loved one.

Fatigue

Being stretched in several directions can lead to fatigue. Caring for two households, caring for a person in ill health, dealing with the night-time wandering of an Alzheimer's patient and coping with incontinence are examples of things you may experience. In addition, having your own sleep interrupted regularly can lead to serious exhaustion. All of these things can last several months or even years.

Isolation

If you are the person primarily responsible for another's care, you may feel tied down and isolated. The person you're caring for might need to have someone nearby at all times, or simply not want to be left alone. Studies have indicated that caregivers experience a significant reduction in the amount of free time they have. You may feel that no one understands your situation or how you're feeling. It is important that you recognize these feelings of isolation and realize that they are normal.

Even though caring for an elderly person can be a stressful experience, it can also be a rewarding one for the caregiver. On the positive side, it can strengthen your relationships and give you a chance to get to know them better.

How Can I Help Myself?

Here are some steps you can take:

- Find someone you trust; such as a family member, friend, co-worker, or neighbor to talk to about your feelings and frustrations.
- Set realistic goals, accept that you may need help with caregiving, and turn to others for help with some tasks. Contact your Area Agency on Aging, home care agencies and local County/Commission of Aging for assistance.
- Don't forget about yourself because you're too busy caring for someone else. Set aside time for yourself, even if it's just an hour or two. Remember, taking care of yourself is not a luxury, it is an absolute necessity for caregivers.
- Be realistic about your loved one's disease, especially if it is a progressive disease such as Parkinson's or Alzheimer's.
- Talk to a professional. Most therapists, social workers, and clergy members are trained to counsel individuals dealing with a wide range of physical and emotional issues.
- Know your limits and do a "reality-check" of your personal situation. Recognize and accept your potential for caregiver burnout. Seek out help!
- Take advantage of respite care services. Respite care provides a temporary break for caregivers. This can range from a few hours of in-home care to a short stay in a nursing home or assisted living facility.
- Educate yourself. The more you know about the illness, the more effective you will be in caring for the person with the illness. Talk with your loved one's physician for advice. The internet has a wealth of information at your disposal.
- Accept your feelings. Having negative feelings; such as frustration or anger and about your responsibilities or the person for whom you are caring is normal. It does not mean you are a bad person or a bad caregiver.
- Stay healthy by eating right and getting plenty of exercise and sleep.

- Develop new tools for coping. Remember to lighten up and accentuate the positive. Use humor to help deal with everyday stresses.
- Join a caregiver support group. Sharing your feelings and experiences with others in the same situation can help you manage stress, locate helpful resources, and reduce feelings of frustration and isolation.

Potential services for the elderly

Home-delivered meals

This service is frequently called Meals on Wheels, and it provides a hot meal delivered to the home at noon, usually on weekdays.

Emergency response systems

Medic Alert and Lifeline are examples of commercial programs that provide different types of emergency service on a 24-hour basis.

Home health care

A variety of medical or personal care services can be brought into the home. Depending on the nature of the service, some may be covered by Medicare or other insurance plans.

Adult day care

Supervised care, planned activities and health services are provided in a community facility for elderly citizens who would otherwise be at home, alone, during the day.

Final Closing Thoughts

Be gentle with yourself and know that you are not alone. Help is there for you. Those "time-outs" can help replenish our physical/mental and spiritual resources. Remember you can't give what you don't have!

***Believe in Yourself.
Protect Your Health.
Reach Out for Help.***