



## *A Twist in Life*

# Caring for Aging Parents

by KATHY TAYLOR-ROGERS

The kids have all grown up and no longer need you to 'run around' after them; you are just beginning to re-assess your life and your new found freedom. But wait, Mother has not been doing so well since Dad passed away and you need to check in on her at least twice a week. The reality of life is that many of us will reach a stage at which we will have at least one parent who requires some assistance. The degree of assistance will depend on many factors including age, health problems, support network, companionship, independence level, etc. Coming to terms with this reality of life can be very difficult. Whether you have a positive view of your childhood or whether you did not have such an ideal childhood, our parents are important people in our lives and their welfare is very important to us. This makes it difficult to come to terms with their loss of independence and need to rely on us for possibly the first time in our lives. It becomes very important for us to come to terms with some of the emotions that accompany this transition in life so that we can move through this stage in a healthy manner.

Even if we are fortunate enough that our parents remain healthy and active well into their eighties, there may be other concerns that arise. Are they safe? Are they eating properly? Are they lonely? These are just a few questions that may create worry. The reality is that people over the age of 75 can be in a vulnerable stage of their lives. Risks are intensified when they are living alone or with a spouse in the same age range. They are weaker and physically less able to defend themselves, hence can be a target for thieves. They can oftentimes be lonely and unwittingly allow con artists into their lives. Elderly people are often victims of phone scams and 'door to door' con artists. These types of individuals can play on their loneliness, build their trust and con them out of money or possessions. It is always wise to find out who is spending time at your parent's home and talk to them about these kinds of dangers. Our province is filled with kind-hearted, generous people who do not realize that there can be such cruel and deceitful people among us.

There are a significant number of our elderly that

have the misfortune of being stricken by debilitating illnesses or disease. This can leave them unable to function independently or in a situation whereby they know that at some stage in their future they will require care. Some of the more common illnesses that impact on our elderly population are Parkinson's disease, Osteoporosis, Huntington's disease, Stroke, Congestive Heart Failure, Diabetes-related illnesses, Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia. If a parent has any diagnosed condition that will likely result in deterioration of abilities then the family needs to begin planning at the earliest opportunity. As soon as the family members are made aware of the condition, there needs to be a meeting scheduled with the physician so that the family can be informed of the extent of the illness and prognosis. Once the family, which includes the parent(s), have all of the information about the diagnosis, expected progression of the disease, possible ways that the disease will impact the parent, their ability to function independently, and treatment plan, they can openly communicate and develop a plan to best meet the parent's needs. It is important that the afflicted parent and their spouse be involved in every aspect of the planning to the extent of their ability. There is a tendency among children to want to 'protect' their parents from bad news. This is done with good intentions, but your parents are adults and have the right to participate in the decisions made around their lives and care plans. I have seen families who have spent enormous amounts of time and energy making plans for their parents without their input and when they finally spoke to the parents about the plan the parents advised that it was not what they wanted. Inclusion of parents changes if there is dementia involved to the point that they cannot fully understand and appreciate the situation.

In the planning phase, you should involve as many family members as possible. It is important to keep those who are living out of the area informed, as this is as much their responsibility as it is any other family member. There are ways that they can contribute to care planning despite their distance. For example, they may agree to schedule some holiday time to spend with

the parent(s) at the same time that you plan a holiday out of the area. This way you can go and enjoy your holiday without having to worry, and they can feel good about doing something to contribute to the needed care. It is important that the responsibilities for care do not get taken on by only one or two family members where the family is larger. The family will need to get information together on resources available in the community, such as meals-on-wheels programs, day care programs at the local nursing home, respite care programs, medic alert/life-line services, palliative care programs, psychogeriatric assessment options, seniors apartments or cottages, nursing home placement options, homemaker services and home support funding options. A well-developed care plan should spread out the needed care so that the burden for care does not rest with one person. The above listed resources can be useful whether an elderly parent is ill or in good health. Our lives are already filled with many different responsibilities, so it has become imperative to find external resources to assist with the care of aging parents instead of trying to do everything ourselves. A caregiver who provides care in a realistic, balanced way will be much more helpful and less prone to caregiver 'burnout'.

Relying on outside agencies and resources to assist in providing care for aging parents is a good way to ensure that care is provided without 'overburdening' family members. Children should not feel guilty when they do not do everything themselves. It is more detrimental to try to take on more than you can reasonably do, as in time, resentment cannot help but build up and this can contribute to the destruction of family relationships. It can also lead to guilt when parents pass away, as you begin to regret things that were said or thought during the stressful time that care was being provided. Although parents can initially be resistant to 'strangers' coming in to their home, if suitable people can be found to do the work it can provide wonderful companionship for them.

Whether your parent(s) are healthy or have medical problems it is always wise to have discussions about what arrangements they would want in the event of different medical complications or in the event of their death. If they were to have a stroke and no longer be able to eat on their own, would they want to be tube fed? These are the kinds of questions best discussed with the family doctor and put into an Advanced Health Care Directive. This directive is a written document that your doctor can keep on file and you can keep a copy with you in the event that you ever need hospitalization. This ensures that your wishes are respected. It is very difficult to expect a family to make these kinds of decisions on a parent's behalf in a time of crisis. It may never be needed, but in the event that it is, it is very reassuring

to know that you are doing what your parent would have wanted. Discussions about wills and funeral arrangements are also important. These can be difficult subjects to bring up but this is why it is much more important to have these discussions while parents are in good health, as it can be even more difficult to raise these topics when their health is failing and you do not want to send messages of lost hope.

Everyone handles crisis and change differently and some of us are able to cope with life transitions better than others. When we are fortunate enough to see our parents enjoy good health throughout their later years, then this phase of life may not create many challenges for us. On the other hand, for any number of reasons, dealing with this phase of life can be quite overwhelming and we need to be cognizant of how we are coping with this new reality. It is important to talk to someone about your emotions surrounding what is happening. If you find it too difficult to talk to those close to you then you may want to consider seeking the ear of a professional counsellor. To be able to provide care to others we must ensure that we take care of ourselves first. If we do not ensure that what we do for others is balanced with being kind to ourselves, then we will overdo it and, instead of providing care, we will end up needing care.

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