

The Emotional Side Of Caregiving

Family caregivers experience a wide range of emotions in response to the demands put upon them: anger, grief, guilt, resentment, joy, compassion and gratitude - all these emotions are normal. It is important, however, as a caregiver, to find a balance between responsibilities to those you tend to and the expression of emotions that come with the role.

Anger and resentment may resurface due to unresolved family issues or because of the amount of time and energy focused on someone else's needs. Practicing self-care and scheduling time for personal interests help dissipate some of these feelings.

It's sad to watch someone who was once competent and capable become frail and dependent. You may experience grief related to the losses both of you are experiencing - loss of independence, plans for the future, your time and freedom and the relationship you previously shared together.

Even the "perfect" caregiver will often feel guilt about deeds done or not done. You may feel guilty about feeling some of the emotions mentioned above, or for wanting to take time for yourself. Sometimes guilt comes from the fact that you are helpless in eliminating your family member's illness or disability.

Ignoring these feelings won't make them go away; it may even make them grow stronger. Trust your feelings as they arise because they are telling you about your own needs. Know that you are not alone and many others experience similar feelings.

Helping you manage your emotions:

- Seek support and talk to a friend, a fellow caregiver, clergy, support group or professional counsellor.

- Include some pleasant activities in your daily schedule. It can lift your spirits to listen to music, enjoy your garden or play with your grandchildren.

- Take one day at a time. Try to stay flexible and accept what you can't change.

- Talk to someone about the worst that could happen and plan what you would do if this occurred.

- If you feel angry, take a break, if possible, and leave the situation. A quick walk can help defuse your feelings. Focus your anger on the situation, not the person you care for.

- Give yourself credit for what you do well. Be realistic about what's possible and what isn't.

Even though caregiving can evoke many difficult emotions, it can also bring great joy, compassion and gratitude for the time you are able to spend with your family member or friend. I came to know my dad more in the months he was ill than the 40-odd years beforehand. Many caregivers feel grateful they are able to "give back" in some way. Spend some time enjoying each other's company.

Finally, remember, feelings are transient. What you feel now is not what you might feel in another hour.

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Senior Living Magazine – Sept., 2007