

Senior Focus

Marge Toeset, Social Worker
Pondera Medical Center

Dealing with Caregiver Guilt

“I just feel so guilty!” “I promised I would never put my dad/mom/husband/wife in the nursing home.” “I can’t do it anymore.”

Have you ever said these words or heard someone else say them? They are common comments from the people I talk with when doing pre-admission meetings with families. It is hard to admit that we can no longer take care of our loved ones. We know the ideal situation would be for them to remain in their home until they pass away. But sometimes the physical needs are such that only trained medical personnel can take care of our loved ones.

You may acknowledge the reality of the situation, but emotionally you will still ask why you feel so guilty when you are doing everything you can to help your loved one?

You may be with your loved one 24/7. You are tired; you are always on-call; you never get a full night’s rest; you rarely go out with your friends anymore; no one wants to come over to your home; your loved one treats you like a servant and wants you to go get this or that, or only wants you to do something; and the list goes on and on. If you have felt like this you might begin to scold yourself. You assess your situation and compare yourself to someone down the street and how selflessly they seem to do things for their loved one while never hearing a complaint. Then you begin to feel resentful and question why? Why did mom, dad or my spouse get sick? What if you had just...? things would have been different. You rationalize that you too have health concerns or personal issues and can hardly take care of your needs much less the physical and emotional needs of your loved one. You begin to think that maybe you can’t do this any longer and maybe it is time to think of assisted living placement or moving your loved one to the nursing home.

So what ARE you to do? First, realize that it is perfectly normal to feel guilty and everyone does experience guilt when caregiving for a loved one, whether you observe it or not. Second, acknowledge your strengths and weaknesses, but focus in on your strengths. You might be better at making a meal or bathing your loved and your friend down the street can hardly boil water but is blessed with the patience of playing games with someone who has dementia. Third, take time to do something nice for yourself. See if a friend or someone from your church can sit with your loved one for an hour so you can go to the coffee shop, get your hair done, do a little gardening, play cards with some friends, or go shopping. You need to take care of yourself so that you will feel refreshed. You need to give yourself approval to have fun. You are not abandoning your loved one. You are still providing care for him/her while you are gone. Don’t let your loved one guilt you into thinking that you “no longer love me” or “care about me” if you go out for a little while without him/her.

It is important to reach out to others if you are feeling overwhelmed, tired, resentful, or guilty. Talk with your pastor/priest/rabbi, contact the local nursing home to speak with the social worker, or contact the local *Agency on Aging, Easter Seals* or *Home Health Agency* for assistance and guidance. You do not have to go on this journey alone, but YOU have to reach out. Others do not know what you are going through unless you tell them. Don’t believe anyone if they tell you that you are a complaining or ungrateful spouse/child. You are an adult looking for support so that you can be the best possible caregiver for your loved one.

“It is not how much you do, but how much love you put in the doing.” *Mother Theresa*