

Joan is 55-years-old, married, with two independent adult daughters and a challenging fulltime career. She is also a daughter and a caregiver struggling with a widowed mother who is set in her ways and sometimes fails to see the 'big' picture.

Keep pace...find peace

Helping your parents stay at home

By Carol Edwards, RN and Katharine Garwood, RN

Joan's mother, Stella, is 80-years-old, independent, strong and stubborn. She lives in her own home on a quiet street in downtown Toronto. She drives her own car and generally looks after herself. Any hint of moving from her house evokes a determined, rigid response. "I have had a good life," Stella tells anyone who will listen. "I know I can go at any time; but, by George, you better accept it, **the only way you're getting me out of my house is in a box.**"

Playing hard

Stella is typical of many of our parents. They value their independence and plan to be self-reliant until death. They increasingly demand to stay in their own homes.

Experts indicate that old age brings an acceptance of the final phase of the life cycle. But middle-aged children see these as years of frailty, filled with risks and challenging times for their aging parents. The contrast of these two views often fosters misunderstanding between the generations and difficulty for the son or daughter responsible for primary care giving. Joan constantly worries about her mother. Is she eating well? **Is she becoming confused? Is there enough stimulation in her life? Above all, is she safe? Should she still be driving her car?**

Thought provoking

Stella's demand to stay at home seems perfectly reasonable to her...and she is not alone.

However, this is often not as simple as it seems. While Stella has accepted death as a reality, she has given no thought

to another potential scenario – the chance of infirmity.

Realities dictate, and statistics confirm, that the older Stella gets, the more her health is going to deteriorate and the more her ability to care for herself will decline.

More than lip service

Barring any medical catastrophe, Stella may be able to stay in her house with the help and support of home care services. The not-so-good news is it can be challenging for someone like Joan, unaccustomed to the way the system works, to get the necessary services that will give Stella proper support, and Joan piece of mind.

While in most localities a multitude of services are available, **the challenge is to effectively navigate a way through the complex health care system.**

Best practice

Difficult as the task may seem, it is not impossible. You must first evaluate how important – and how realistic – it is to the person to stay at home, and then once you have made the decision, the next step is to 'make it work'.

Fortunately there are alternatives that can make life much easier. For example, Joan decided to use professional help – a geriatric care manager – to set up the home care model for her mother (see sidebar).

Guiding principle

Remember, that the ultimate goal is the continued health, wellness and safety of the elderly person you are caring for. For Joan,

QUICK TIP

There are literally hundreds of useful products designed specifically to make life easier for the elderly in their homes. These range from tub rails for safety in the bathroom to devices to help opening jars and bottles.

Visit a home health care product retailer or drug store specializing in home care for ideas on how to make your aging parents' home safe and accessible.

her mother has not afforded her the option of a nursing home or long term care placement. She is faced with the choice of helping Stella live at home until the end...and she will do the best she can to respect her mother's wishes. ●

Staying at home: What you need to do

- ✓ Identify key medical, health and safety issues; usually in consultation with the physician, therapist and other health professionals.
- ✓ Work through the financial costs of staying at home through sickness and health until the end. Consult with health law specialists and financial advisers if necessary.
- ✓ Provide a detailed plan of care, identifying problems and the potential need for special services.
- ✓ Research, arrange and plan to monitor in-home care from personal support workers and homemakers.
- ✓ Be prepared for crisis intervention.
- ✓ Ensure the nutritional status, critical to the well being of the person, by menu planning, meal preparation, and providing specific recipes for the home help to prepare.
- ✓ Be prepared to go to doctor appointments, etc. to provide interpretation and follow-up if referrals to other professionals are necessary.
- ✓ Assess the safety needs in the home and implement any needed improvements.
- ✓ Organize referrals to other health care professionals such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists, podiatrists, psychiatrists, dentists, etc.
- ✓ Act as liaison to other family members who live far away, ensuring that things are going well and alerting families to problems.
- ✓ Arrange for around-the-clock palliative care in the familiar comfort of the elder's own home when the time comes.

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Joan's solution

Geriatric care managers – the boomer's respite

Joan learned about the concept of geriatric care management through a brochure in her local pharmacy. Given her dilemma, she was receptive to hiring a professional with an objective eye to help her manage the situation.

A care manager subsequently went to see Joan's mother. A written assessment confirmed that her mother was okay on her own at present, but recommended a couple of changes in the home to maintain safety and prevent falls.

Joan felt relieved and more comfortable knowing that an expert had evaluated her mother's situation, and would be available to help out as the situation escalated. Joan's solution is to retain her role as a

caring daughter without putting herself or her caregiving responsibilities at risk, or overwhelming her personal or professional life.

"The only reason I would take up jogging is so I could hear heavy breathing again."

Erma Bombeck

What is a care manager?

A geriatric care manager works with older adults and caregivers to identify risks, clarify needs, and evaluate options. Often health professionals, such as registered nurses, they have extensive knowledge about the cost, quality, and availability of services in a community. They can conduct a personalized care-planning assessment to identify existing and potential problems (including safety, nutritional status, and mental state of the elderly individual). The details are communicated to the family in a written report. Care managers can also act as liaison with the local health authorities or insurers to determine eligibility for assistance.

In essence, care managers can effectively assume the primary responsibility for the care of the elder on behalf of the family.

