

For many of us, the role of caring for aging parents is not totally new. We may finally find ourselves in this role after a lifetime of rehearsals – from babysitting as a teenager, to nurturing our own children. Despite all the practice, however, caring for an aged relative, spouse or friend has its unique challenges and can be the most difficult of all.

The three Rs of caregiving

Principles that can make you a better caregiver

By Carol Edwards, RN and Katharine Garwood, RN

The challenge is to care effectively and compassionately for someone who is, on the one hand, an increasingly dependent person and, on the other, still a dignified adult whose pride can be injured.

And it's not an easy one. One of the keys to success in tackling this difficult task is to ensure that the so-called 'three Rs' of effective caregiving – *respect, realistic expectations and respite* – are front and centre in all of your efforts. These three Rs, especially respect, address both your needs as the caregiver, and those of the parent or elderly relative you are caring for.

How do these three principles work? They work both directly and indirectly; individually and in a caring association. The best way to illustrate is to show them in action and, equally importantly, what happens when they are not applied.

Take the case of John, a married high school teacher with two kids living in Winnipeg, who was faced with serving as the unofficial care coordinator for his aging parents.

John's parents were in their 70s. Both were physically strong and active, still participating in outdoor activities, and living independently in their own home. John and his mother, however, noticed a decline in his father's mental state – the first signs of Alzheimer's disease. It was not long before his mother could no longer cope with his father's aggressive outbursts and constant wandering. She asked for help with looking after her husband at home.

The decision was made by John to sell his parents' home and move both parents in to live with him and his family. John would be his parents



'caregiver'. This act of family loyalty and kindness may have seemed the natural thing to do at the time, yet the consequences were almost devastating. Eventually, John's father was placed in a long-term care facility while his mother moved into a rental apartment unit. John's marriage did survive, but his relationship with his parents was irrevocably damaged.

The mistake that John, his parents and family made – although well intentioned – was essentially to ignore those vitally important three Rs.

R RESPECT

This is the most important principle to keep in mind when accepting the role and responsibilities of caregiving. Respect comes in many forms, including:

RESPECT for aging: The attitude of the caregiver toward aging can have a tremendous impact on the elderly. Despite her advancing years, John's mother was still very active, mentally astute, and capable of independent living. To John, however, his mother was 'old' and needed his help, which came on his terms. An effective caregiver respects that aging is not a 'disease' but merely a slowing down of life, and assists in creating a sense of purpose through maintained independence. Aging is a family affair. It has a ripple effect on the entire family unit.

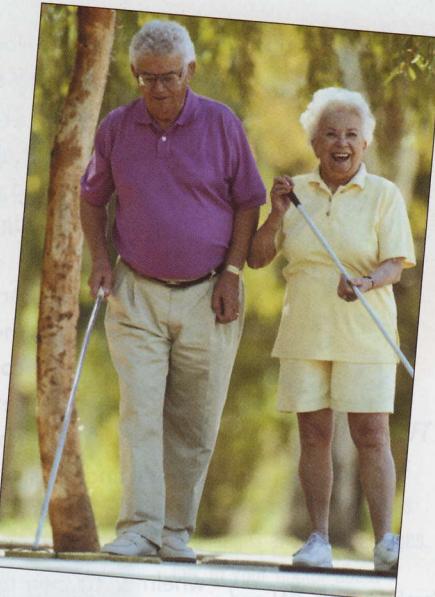
RESPECT for an individual's roles: Understand that living with, or being cared for by family, can threaten the status of the older person. The 'reversal of roles', going from looking after a son or daughter (even though actual caregiving may have ended decades ago) to being looked after by one can cause resentment and angry feelings to develop. An aging parent may be slower in step and thought, but has a long life of experience and wisdom to draw upon. A successful caregiving arrangement often includes the perception of the elder that the decisions being made are hers or his.

RESPECT for a person's wishes: Whether it be the wishes written in a Living Will or those wishes expressed daily, they are important and should be honoured whenever possible. Acknowledge that an elderly parent may not have the same set of values. John's parents were prepared financially to stay in their home until 'the end'. However, John was 'blinded' by

the problems he saw his parents facing, and therefore did not help his mother explore the services that would be available in her own home.

RESPECT for professional advice:

Annual evaluations by a doctor are invaluable. Changes in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease are subtle. Many elderly find it difficult to consult a doctor when there is no obvious physical problem, as they struggle to conceal their mental difficulties. In the same way, many children are reluctant to concede that their parents are aging. John could have benefited from a realistic overview of his father's condition and the challenges involved. It would have also been wise for him to accompany his parents on their visits to the doctor.



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R RESPITE

John's mother had been struggling for some months before coming to John for help. As the primary caregiver to her husband, the role was becoming overwhelming. She did not wish to seek help from her son. She was valiantly trying to respect the wish of her husband to stay in his own home. Finally, her approach to John led to the outcome she had feared. John assumed the role of caregiver without understanding the challenge and what he was capable of doing or not doing.

John failed to be realistic in his evaluation. He underestimated the level of independence his mother was capable of (if she had the proper help and support). And he overestimated how well he and his own family could cope with the many challenges of caring for his parents. He also underestimated how such an arrangement would strain his relationship with his wife and children.

Limits need to be set in any caregiving situation, or else conflicts are bound to arise. The first step in setting limits is to examine all possibilities and recognize what is within your capabilities, and what



"The first hundred years are the hardest."

William Mizner

By

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may be beyond you.

This goes back to respect – a respect for your own limitations. The caregiver should work together with the elder, if possible, in developing realistic goals and plans, acknowledging their time and knowledge deficits.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

An increased number of family members are providing more complex care in the home setting than ever before. This is not easy. It requires considerable mental and physical effort. At times it can be exhausting, and many people keep going, without a break. In too many cases, caregivers are overwhelmed by their responsibilities. The result can be burnout. John came close to burning out. The efforts required to care for his parents, combined with the demands of work and family life were too much, leaving him physically tired, mentally dull and withdrawn with his wife and children.

Regular short respite for John's father arranged through a local long-term care facility

may have been all John and his mother required to avoid being overwhelmed.

Experts almost universally promote the importance of respite for caregivers. Respite services are available in most communities to ensure the caregiver receives adequate rest, sleep, exercise, nutrition, socialization, social support, and even financial aid and health management.

Help is available from a variety of resources, including community and senior centres, advocacy associations (e.g. the Alzheimer Society and Parkinson Society), Friendly Visitor programs, nursing agencies and other support services. Professional care managers can help to access these services and generally assist in ensuring all the pieces of effective caring are in place.

The prospect of caring for an aging parent is a reality for many of us today. It is never too early to prepare for your parent's aging. Start by stepping back and taking a look at the big picture, including your needs as well as those of the elder person. And make sure any plans you make take the three Rs of caregiving into consideration. ●

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