

The Gift (and Challenges) of Being a Caregiver

Governor Walker has issued a proclamation declaring November Family Caregivers Month. Whatever form it takes, I am always pleased to see caregivers being acknowledged.

Thirty nine percent of working adults are family caregivers. That simple statement has many dynamics behind it, such as families and individual caregivers trying to balance work, family and caring for a loved, and finding that twenty four hours in a day aren't nearly enough.

Are there gifts in the act of caring for a loved one? Absolutely! Doing something meaningful for someone we love, someone who's done so much for us over the years is a gift. I believe we grow in many ways, in particular becoming more empathetic, when we are engaged in caregiving. And we learn a lot about ourselves in the process.

But the role of caregiver is not an easy one. Whether caring for a parent, spouse or dear friend, I've found there are some common challenges.

- What is a "reasonable" expectation of a caregiver? So many caregivers have unreasonable expectations of themselves. They should be able to do more... it's never enough...I owe them more...no one can do it as well as I can. What gets lost in those internal thoughts is "self". Just as the gas tank on your car runs empty and needs to be refilled, so does our own tank. Ignoring when your personal "gas light" comes on not only hurts you, but it has the potential to adversely impact the care receiver. Taking breaks to recharge your body, mind and spirit is not a selfish act, quite the opposite.

- Why is it so hard to ask for help? It's often when the caregiver has experienced a lack of sleep, maybe hasn't taken a hiatus from caregiving for a while that their cup gets empty and the feeling of being overwhelmed washes over like a wave. Yet asking for help isn't an easy thing to do. When I ask my clients why it's so hard, they say things like "this is a commitment I made" or "what would they think of me if I appeared unloving by my words or actions?" Many have said to me that asking for help feels like they're saying I'm not up to the task — that I've failed. The fact is we're human, and admitting that a little assistance would be greatly appreciated is a sign of strength not weakness.

- And then there's the guilt. It's woven into all that we do. It's a part of what causes us to expect more of ourselves than is reasonable, what keeps us from asking for help, and adds needless anxiety to an already difficult situation. And sometimes guilt keeps us from making the tough decisions. Is your loved one really doing well in their home alone or is their life rapidly narrowing? Are they really safe in their current environment or is it time to consider an alternative? Guilt can sometimes keep us from making an honest assessment of the circumstances. It's not easy to tell a parent that they are no longer safe in their home.

Years ago resources were limited. But today, there is a plethora of services that can meet the needs of older adults. Often the hard part seems to be finding someone who can assess your circumstances and point you in the direction of

cont'd

resources that match your needs. It is for that express purpose that Laureate Cares was created. Do you need home care, assisted living or a nursing home? When is the right time to consider new care options? What's important to know when considering a care facility? What funding options are available to pay for care? Or do you simply need to talk to someone who understands the experience of a caregiver? If you are a caregiver for an older adult and have unanswered questions, I would encourage you to call the Laureate Cares resource line at 262-832-7113. It is a free service, and will put you in touch with a skilled professional with 20+ years of experience in long term care.

Being a caregiver is one of the most honorable and highest callings. We welcome the opportunity to celebrate all caregivers in November as well as every other month of the year.

*This article is a reprint of a blog posted by
Adele Lund, Laureate Group's Director of
Community and Business Relations*