

The rewards of caregiving:

# 10 positive ways to rethink your role

By Christine Taylor, MGS

**A**s many authors have written and lecturers have noted, if we were to sort jobs of every description and rank them in terms of difficulty, parenting would most certainly appear near the top of the list. But would any mother or father refer to being a parent as a burden? Never. Trying? Absolutely. Exhausting? Without a doubt. Exasperating? Definitely!

Caring for an aging parent is an often-breathtaking, upside-down version of parenting. Your schedule now revolves around your parents' day: worrying when they don't pick up the phone; driving them to appointments; rushing over to solve a household maintenance problem; budgeting more time for grocery shopping to include their list of items; monitoring their finances; and taking them to religious services—to name just a few of the tasks involved.

At times, caring for your parents is demanding and tiring—just like parenting your own child. Without a doubt, it's challenging. Why, though, is caregiving, and never parenting, referred to as a burden? There are several reasons for this:

- Many of us hope that we are going to be parents one day, but it is never assumed that one day we will have to take care of an aging or ill parent.
- There is a large body of research that highlights and focuses on the negative side of caring for an aging parent.
- People naturally become quite fixated on the challenges of caregiving rather than the rewards. Try looking for an article entitled "Rewards of caring for an aging parent" and you'll find a tranche of articles filled with far more negativity than positivity—a terrible shame.

Instead of focusing on the challenges of being a caregiver, we need to try to concentrate on the fact that there are genuine rewards and benefits to caring for an aged parent. The following list should help in redefining our approach and helps to create a more positive attitude toward the work of caregivers.

## 1 Rewards for both

As our parents age we want to visit them frequently, but "things" tend to come up in

our days. But with the commitment of being a dedicated caregiver, we must visit and be more actively involved in their lives. Consequently, in our new role and routine, we get to spend more quality time together—time that can be spent sharing meaningful memories and thoughts, and laughing about all the same things you found funny as a child.

## 2 A great way to say "thank you"

As we become parents ourselves, we better understand all that our parents did for us and the sacrifices made to make things possible. Now that our parents are aging and need assistance, there is no better way to thank them than to simply be there and help them as much as needed and as much as we are able.

**"Life is not about how fast you run, or how high you climb, but how well you bounce."**

*Anonymous*

## Take care of yourself

- Incorporate activities that give you pleasure even when you don't really feel like it. Listen to music, work in the garden, engage in a hobby...whatever it is that you enjoy.
- Pamper yourself. Take a warm bath and light candles. Find some time for a manicure or a massage.
- Eat balanced meals to nurture your body. Find time to exercise even if it's a short walk everyday. Do the best you can to sleep at least seven hours a night.
- Laughter really is the best medicine. Buy a light-hearted book or rent a comedy. Whenever you can, try to find some humour in everyday situations.
- Keep a journal. Write down your thoughts and feelings. This helps provide perspective on your situation and serves as an important release for your emotions.
- Arrange a telephone call with a family member, a friend or a volunteer from a church or senior center so that someone is in touch each day to be sure everything is all right. This person can help by contacting other family members with status updates or letting them know if you need anything.
- Try to set a time for afternoons or evenings out. Seek out friends and family to help you so that you can have some time away from the home. If it is difficult to leave, invite friends and family over to visit with you. Share some tea or coffee. It is important that you interact with others.

Source: [http://helpguide.org/elder/caring\\_for\\_caregivers.htm](http://helpguide.org/elder/caring_for_caregivers.htm)

“I try and take one day at a time, but sometimes several days attack me at once.”

Jennifer Yane

### 3 Stronger than you realized

Caregivers often reach a point, much like a marathon runner, where they feel they don't have anything left in the gas tank. Exhaustion from working a full-time job, looking after elders and caring for your own family sets in, and there is often little support. Always remember: caregiving will challenge you greatly—but when you look back, you will see you have achieved things you never thought possible.

### 4 Inner growth

Some caregivers report their days become rewarding simply because of the inner growth they experience. Unquestionably, caregiving gives you an opportunity to develop as a person. For one thing, it requires patience and will teach you how to develop this virtue. The valuable lessons you learn about yourself through the give and take of caregiving can (and will) have an impact on your whole personhood. It can change your life, and the lives of those around you, for the better.

### 5 See the positive

The main difference between caring for aging parents and young children is that the planned outcome of child rearing is that your baby will grow up to become an independent, self-sufficient adult. With caregiving, you are

helping your parents through difficult times to the end of life, and you live with the sad reality that death is the final result. If you let it, this thought can be terribly draining and depressing. Instead, stop and look at the silver lining, and realize there are positive outcomes as well.

For example, most adults express a strong desire to age in place, staying in their own home. To make this possible, you prepare your parents' meals, cut their lawn, modify their home so it is safer and shovel their snow. Sometimes, the positive outcome may not be so easy to see, but can be as real as recognizing the fact that you are helping your loved ones stay in the home they love (and likely one with many fond memories for you, too). You are helping them enjoy their lives to the maximum in their old age. You are making an enormous positive difference!

### 6 Do it well

Some say that if you want something done right, do it yourself. If you live by this motto, can you imagine completely handing over the job of caring for your mom or dad to



## Staying healthy as you care

- ✓ **Start the day with a relaxing ritual.** Rather jumping out of bed as soon as you wake up, spend at least fifteen minutes meditating, writing in your journal, doing gentle stretches, or reading something that inspires you.
- ✓ **Adopt healthy eating, exercising and sleeping habits.** When you eat right, engage in regular physical activity and get plenty of rest, you have the energy and resilience to deal with life's hassles and demands.
- ✓ **Set boundaries.** Don't overextend yourself. Learn how to say "no" to requests on your time. If you find this difficult, remind yourself that saying "no" allows you to say "yes" to the things that you truly want to do.
- ✓ **Take a daily break from technology.** Set a time each day when you completely disconnect. Put away your laptop, turn off your phone and stop checking email.
- ✓ **Nourish your creative side.** Creativity is a powerful antidote to burnout. Try something new, start a fun project or resume a favourite hobby. Choose activities that have nothing to do with work.
- ✓ **Learn how to manage stress.** When you're on the road to burnout, you may feel helpless. But you have a lot more control over stress than you may think. Learning how to manage stress can help you regain your balance.

Source: [http://helpguide.org/mental/burnout\\_signs\\_symptoms.htm](http://helpguide.org/mental/burnout_signs_symptoms.htm)

someone else? Sure, you'll need help, but you know your parents better than anyone else and you know how they like things done. You can take pride and pleasure in that.

### 7 *Sense of family responsibility*

From interviews of 471 family caregivers, Health Canada found that 67 per cent reported they care for their aging parents because of the feeling of family responsibility. Superficially, this may seem like many take on the caregiving role simply because they feel an obligation or guilt. Don't look at it that way. Look upon caregiving as an honourable role of respect and love.

### 8 *Know that your loved one appreciates you*

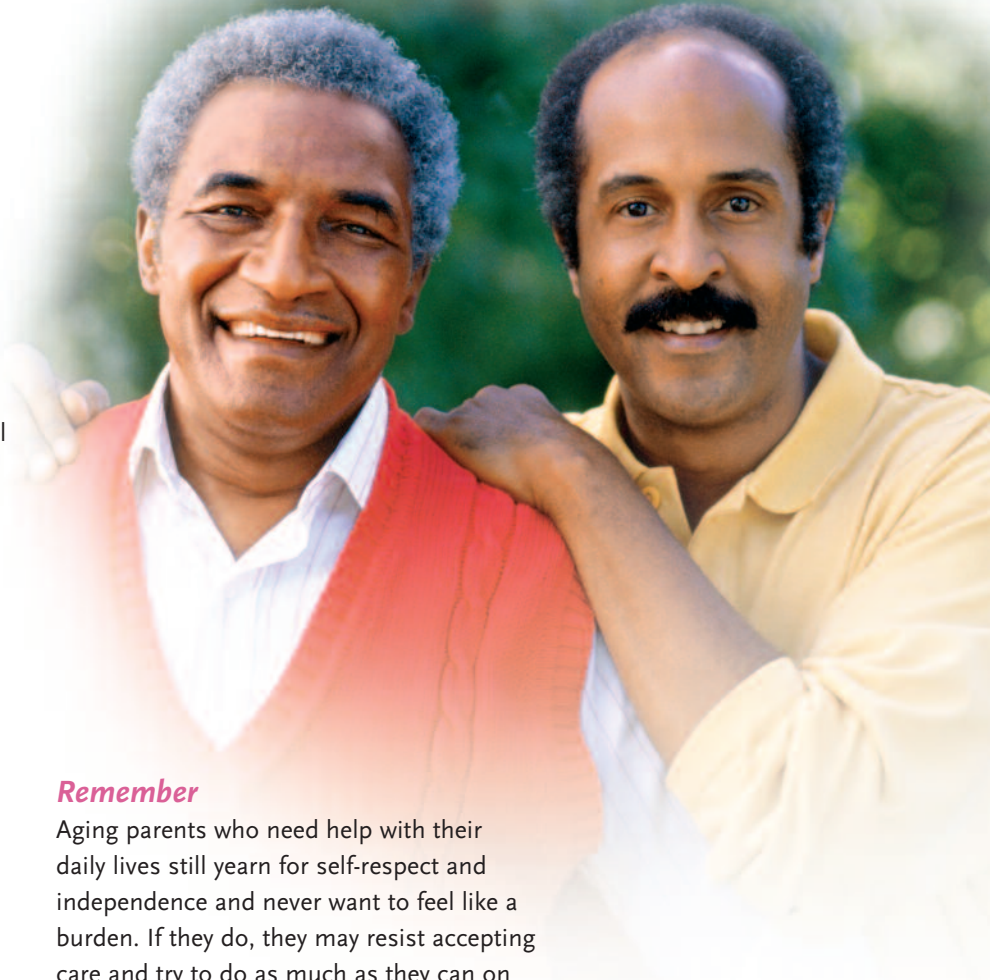
If you are caring for a loved one with dementia, you may never get a verbal thank you or even a smile to let you know you are appreciated. But watch for subtle non-verbal cues. Those with Alzheimer's, even in the late stages of the disease, still use eye contact, gestures, looks, body posture, nods, facial expressions and breathing patterns to communicate their affection. Look for this non-verbal language that expresses your parents' love and appreciation for your care.

### 9 *Do unto others*

Parents know that one of the most rewarding aspects of raising children is making them happy. Like parenting, caregiving is a very selfless job. One of the rewards is simply knowing you are making your parents happy and their lives more comfortable and pleasant. By doing your very best, you can rest assured that they would not want anyone else to care for them more than you.

### 10 *"I should have"*

When a parent passes away, many adult children are left feeling they should have done more to help. Caregivers know they have done everything they could to make the later years of their parents' lives as comfortable and easy as possible. A caregiver does not have to live with the regret of not being there for their parents through the challenging times.



### *Remember*

Aging parents who need help with their daily lives still yearn for self-respect and independence and never want to feel like a burden. If they do, they may resist accepting care and try to do as much as they can on their own, at times inflicting damage on their health and well-being.

If we start to emphasize and focus on the rewards of caregiving, it may not seem like the awful task we have been led to expect. While we shouldn't sugar-coat the work and dedication required from a caregiver, we must also not forget that increased longevity, smaller family units and our aging population mean there is an ever-greater demand and opportunity for families to pitch in and help with care.

As our population continues to age and more of our parents wish to age in place rather than become institutionalized, we must be ready to take on the role of caregiver—and that the job, with its many rewards, is given the respect, dignity and attention it deserves. ●



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