

Taking time for yourself

A counselor, writing in a professional magazine states that the advice, “you need to take time for yourself,” is usually not well received by family caregivers. He said that caregivers hear this advice as a challenge to, or a criticism of, their commitment to the person and of a conscious decision to put aside their own needs for a while.

The advice to “take time for yourself” may be based on some particular values or beliefs we hold. Take these common issues for example:

Issue 1: In addition to providing care and support for a spouse, parent or other dependant adult, caregivers may also be providing care for in-laws, younger children, grandchildren or friends. Women in particular have been well trained to nurture others and to put aside their own needs. As the stress of meeting these competing demands rises, so too may feelings of anger, depression, guilt or inadequacy. The sense of satisfaction that is supposed to accompany nurturing is not there. Although the person you are giving assistance to is more vulnerable and dependant on others than you, you also have needs that matter.

Issue 2: When they make a commitment to their parent, spouse or other relative to provide support, caregivers may also make promises they feel duty bound to keep. For example, “I’ll never put you in a home”. When they come up against their own limits they may feel trapped and helpless to change the situation. To ask for help can feel like a betrayal of the relationship. Men are especially well trained to be doers, providers and protectors of others. When they can’t ‘fix’ the situation they can feel frustrated, useless, or a failure. Asking for help may not be easy as feelings of pride and self-confidence can be challenged.

No one can be or do everything for another. It does ‘take a village’. Sharing the care with family, friends and public and private care services can free you up to enjoy your relationship. It can help protect you from becoming exhausted and ill.

Issue 3: Families often designate one person to provide the care. This designation may be made consciously with the willing consent of the person taking on the role. But it may also happen because of assumptions, such as ‘it’s a woman’s role’ or, “you’re single so you have the time”.

Everyone, including yourself, may assume you will do it and that you are willing, without an open discussion about what is involved. This can lead to resentment, feelings of guilt, anger, misunderstandings, and accusations.

You have the right to decide how you want to spend your time and energy. You have a right to set limits. It’s okay to say no.

To take time for yourself, therefore, mean more than time away from the other person. IT can mean examining expectations; of the person being cared for, of family, of oneself, 0or of society. It can mean honoring yourself and your needs, asking others for help where they can, allowing yourself the mixed

feelings you have. It can involve consciously choosing to do what you do and deciding what you are no longer willing or able to do. Talking with someone you trust can help you sort out these issues.