

Care-Giving Spouses Must Learn to Overcome Guilt

By Wesley E. Wright and Molly Dear Abshire, as published in the Houston Chronicle Senior Living Section on September 22, 2010.

Many couples aging at home are faced with one spouse whose health is declining due to a chronic illness or condition. Year after year, this situation takes a toll on the family.

Common scenario

As the spouse in decline continues to need more help, the care-giving spouse must provide more assistance. This scenario is common throughout our community and across the country.

Elder law attorneys encounter this caregiver situation between aging spouses on a regular basis. For example, in appointments we often hear children of a caregiver parent say, "Dad has developed serious medical problems and has Alzheimer's. He can be difficult, and our mother continues to care for him without help. Now mom is showing signs of decline because it is hard work, and we are concerned for her health and safety lifting him the way she does."

When we look into the faces of the children as they explain and look into the face of the mother sitting next to them, the story reveals itself.

Vows

The well spouse has found herself in a deteriorating situation with the person she vowed to be with in sickness and in health. The burden of guilt is obvious and overwhelming. This spouse can't negotiate or be objective through the feelings she has for the other and the apparent need to secure alternative care.

Unfortunately, at-home care paid on an out-of-pocket basis is so costly that many people can't afford it.

So what does she do? Does she continue to be the primary-care provider for her husband? How will she deal with the guilt of handing over the care-giving responsibilities?

Acknowledgment

She is aging and must care for herself. It is important to acknowledge the dedication and sacrifice of the well spouse.

We let them know they have done an admirable and selfless job with the burden of taking care of their spouse. Then, we carefully explain there comes a time when one must provide a different arrangement for their spouse before an injury occurs.

Alternative care

We see people shaving years off their own lives while caring for another. It is time to consider alternative care arrangements.

More frequently than not, a care giving spouse is relieved when they hear these words. They were hoping for someone to tell them it is OK to have an alternative arrangement, as opposed to turning their home into a nursing home.

Choices

There are several choices to be weighed when planning for the care of a loved one. Some options are costly private pay in-home attendant care, moderately priced adult day programs, or comparable companion care through religious or community organizations.

If skilled care and nursing is required a licensed facility that accepts both Medicare and Medicaid should be considered while working closely with a Certified Elder Law Attorney, to help retain the couples finances for the spouse living in the community.

A suitable placement can be arranged for the spouse that needs care. Then, the at-home spouse can rest, recoup and visit her spouse in the nursing home or other care placement as much as she wants.

This way, she can advocate for his needs and continue to provide her husband with the love and emotional support that only she can give him.

If this is your situation, it may be time for you to consider this idea before you hurt yourself or shorten your own life.

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