

Life as a Working Caregiver

By Linda S. Thompson

How can I talk with my Mother about her health? How do I approach Dad about his finances? Is my mother-in-law really able to live independently and if so, who can I call on to visit her daily? How do I balance my job, my family responsibilities, my duties to my elder parent, and still have time for me?

These are the questions I hear everywhere I go and from most people I talk with. During my lectures, workshops and presentations, the questions I'm most often asked are about working caregivers issues.

None of these questions have easy answers; there are no quick fixes, no one-stop solutions, no magic wand. But there are a lot of resources available if we just know where to look, who to call, what questions to ask, and how to approach the subject.

When my Mother moved to Phoenix in 1994 to share my home ten years ago, neither one of us could visualize what the future held. At that point, she was mobile, she still had her own car, could get around on her own, could keep the house in order and did most of the cooking. As the years went by, she gave up driving, has balance problems making mobility an issue, no longer is confident balancing her own check book, and has trouble putting together a meal. We had a house keeper, a yard maintenance company, and when I went on vacation, we would hire a non-medical home care agency to look in on her daily. As her ability to do things decreased, the demands on my time increased. I kept thinking what will happen if the caregiver all of a sudden needs care?

And I had it easy! Why? Mom was still relatively healthy; she was able to get out of bed, take a shower (with modifications made to her bathroom), could dress herself and get her own breakfast. She was an avid reader and kept me up to date on things in the newspaper that I didn't have time to read. And most especially, because my Mom was one of the most pragmatic, practical, common-sense women I've ever met. She realized I was stressed out and tired. Therefore, she did everything possible to avoid making demands on my time. We approached each situation with as much humor as possible, thus relieving tension that so often occurs between elders and their children. She accepted that while she was my mother and I was her daughter, I was no longer her child and we treated each other with respect. In almost every sense of the word, we had reversed our roles in life. That transition required talking openly about each issue as it came up. Easy? No. Impossible? Again, no. But it does take time, patience and diplomacy.

So what do you do if you aren't as lucky as I was? What if your parent or elder loved one needs constant care, has Alzheimer's or dementia, cannot be left alone, or is not easy to get along with? Check into the non-medical home care agencies around your area. There are several excellent companies that offer a variety of services for a very reasonable price. How about adult day care?

Approach your supervisor or manager and tell them your situation. Don't make excuses, don't take on an "oh poor me attitude," just tell them honestly what's happening in your life. Ask for flexible work hours. Perhaps you have a job that can be done from home a day or two each week. If necessary, mention that you don't know of a physician in town that will see your Mom at 6:30 PM after you get off work, therefore you will, at times, have to take Mom to her appointments. Sometimes all you have to do is talk about it and help will be forthcoming. For those of you who work in positions that allow no flexibility, perhaps it's time to look for another position. Perhaps it's time to make the decision of "my mom or my job." If you reach that point, tell your employer of your decision. That could change the dynamics considerably; at least they would know you are serious, and could possibly reconsider their position.



Ask your employer to offer educational workshops and other means of providing information on local resources and services that could relieve you of some of the responsibilities. Point out that in the long run, your productivity will increase and your time off might decrease if you just knew who to go to with particular issues.

Last but not least: TOSS GUILT OUT THE WINDOW! If you can say with all honesty that you are doing the absolute best you can with the resources and time you have, what are you feeling guilty about? This word alone can cause depression, stress-related illness and resentment toward the one you are caring for. It is unhealthy.

And don't forget, the caregiver needs to take care of themselves. Treat yourself to lunch with a friend, a movie, an afternoon at the spa, a day trip, whatever it takes to get you away from the job at hand. Schedule this time on your calendar and don't forget to keep that appointment with yourself. You've earned it!

Linda Thompson is the author of *Planning for Tomorrow, Your Passport to a Confident Future*, a common sense approach to life planning; and *A Caregiver's Journey, You Are Not Alone*, a survival guide for working caregivers. *Every Generation Needs a New Revolution, How Six Generations Across Nine Decades can Find Harmony and Peaceful Coexistence*, is Linda's most recent book. To find out more about Linda's presentation and her books, visit: <http://lifepathsolutions.biz/>.