

When It Is Just Too Much

By Judith S. Parnes, L.C.S.W., C.M.C

With modern medicine leading to longer and longer life spans, more people than ever are becoming caregivers for their aging parents. It is a role, much like parenthood, that does not come with instructions. Good hearted and well-meaning adult children are managing in some cases, but not quite managing in others. Yet it is as important to take care of yourself as it is to take care of your parent.

Recognize the Signs

Whether your parent is relatively independent or requires round the clock care, and no matter how good the relationship is, there is an element of stress involved in knowing someone is depending on you for their well being. It is a throw back to when your own children were young. It is an ever-present awareness of responsibility. Your independent parent may go on senior outings and be able to take care of their own personal needs. But maybe they have a history of falls or forgetfulness. So it is you they turn to, or maybe even live with, to ensure their safety. If you are caring for a parent who has a higher level of impairment, or one who needs 24-hour attention, physical stress can be added to the emotional tension.

If you are in one of these scenarios, you need to make sure you are taking care of yourself as well. Be alert for feelings of depression or a sense of being overwhelmed. You might be so involved with taking care of your loved one, you don't realize you are letting your own social contacts and support system slip away. You need to have your own emotional tank filled to maintain your own health.

Danger signs that you are struggling include, losing interest in the things you always enjoyed, depression anxiety, abusing alcohol and feeling a sense of anger or resentment towards your loved one.

What Can You Do?

There is no reason to go it alone. This is where a Professional Geriatric Care Manager can be an excellent resource. A Geriatric Care Manager is a health care professional who is committed to supporting older adults and their families in maintaining independence, dignity and quality of life. Utilizing their training, knowledge and extensive experience, a Care Manager can evaluate your circumstances and offer suggestions and recommendations for you and your parents.

A Care Manager will first of all validate your need for support. As a specialized professional, the Care Manager will be aware of a myriad of resources in your area that can offer respite care and other forms of aid. The Care Manager takes the needs of the whole family into consideration. So while care for your loved one is managed, you will be encouraged to explore how best to take care of *you*.

Some ideas to consider might be joining a support group, adding exercise to your day, watching your own nutrition, re-involving yourself in your hobbies and activities. It is essential not to isolate yourself, but to take advantage of the help and support that is available. Your needs are as important as everyone else's. By taking care of your own health, you will be able to provide the best care to your loved one.

Judith S. Parnes, L.C.S.W., C.M.C., Gerontologist And Elder Care Consultant is Executive Director of Elder Life Management, Inc., Ocean, NJ. They provide quality elder care planning and management services to older adults and their families. Please visit www.elderlifemanagement.org or call (732) 493-8080 for more information