

Caring for an Aging Loved One

All of us know that our parents, spouse and other family members will eventually grow old and face the inevitable health challenges. We even understand that sickness and death are part of living in a fallen world. But we are never quite ready for these realities to hit our own loved ones – especially when a debilitating disease gradually robs them of a once active life or seeps away their memories.

We spent five years caring for my wife's mother while Parkinson's disease stole her health and independence. We were among the forty percent of caregivers also raising young children, and understand the stress and heartache this family season brings. For us, it became necessary to back out of nearly everything else in order to fulfill our primary calling to "be Jesus" by serving an aging loved one during her final days.

If you find yourself facing a similar situation, whether with a parent or a spouse, you can take steps to become proactive by understanding some of what this season will bring, including...

LINGERING GRIEF - Long before an aging spouse or parent takes their final breath you will experience an underlying grief as you observe their loss of vitality, strength, mental faculties and other traits that make them the person you love. Mixed with the physical and emotional exhaustion this season can bring – you may even feel yourself slipping into depression. Seek help to avoid allowing these feelings to overtake you, but recognize that such emotions are normal and testify to just how valuable the person you are losing has been.

SPECIAL GRACE - The most common duties caregivers handle are transportation, grocery shopping, household chores, help with medications, and assistance with bathing and dressing.

Despite the humble nature of such activities, the majority of caregivers use words like “rewarding” and “happy” to describe the care giving process. Clearly, God gives a special grace to those who humble themselves to serve the aging and ailing.

CHANGING ROLES – The care giving child gradually becomes the parent. The care giving spouse is no longer able to rely on her husband's strength or wife's support. Primary caregivers can also encounter strained relationships with other members of the family who may expect input on or question difficult decisions. In one way or another, expect these relationships to change as a loved one's health deteriorates.

FAMILY STRESS – For those who are married and raising their own children, caring for an aging loved one can add tremendous stress to the family dynamic. There is less time, less marital energy, less patience with childhood irresponsibility, and less ability to give everyone the attention they need. That's why it is important to involve the whole family in the care giving experience. (Even young children can hold a hand or give a hug!) Everyone will need God's special grace, so be intentional about giving them opportunities to participate in what can be described as the ultimate family service project.

If you are in the midst of this season, our prayer is that God will give you the strength and grace needed to face the prolonged grief and quiet sacrifices required.

Dear Lord - please come along side those of us called to care for an aging or dying loved one. Help us to “be Jesus” like we've never been before! Amen.

GOING FURTHER - Resources

Recommended Book:

Complete Guide to Caring for Aging Loved Ones (from Focus on the Family) offers very practical advice to those trying to navigate the many decisions and issues associated with caring for an aging spouse, parent or other loved one.

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