

**Enriching the Lives of Others while Keeping the Balance in Yours**  
**By Barbara Ashcroft B.A. M.ED.**

Most of us at one time or another will find ourselves called upon to tend to the needs of a frail or terminally ill family member or friend. Any one of us could be called upon to care for an older parent, an accident victim of any age, or a dear friend recently diagnosed with a degenerative or terminal disease. We never know when this call may come. Our first response may be one of fear. Most of us do not have medical backgrounds and may panic at the thought of dealing with the unknown. We might also wonder how we will manage to do this with our already over-scheduled daily routine. We may even find ourselves sandwiched between the needs of our aging parents and the ongoing needs of our young children. Then, added to the mix are the daily demands of our workplace.

We may begin to feel overwhelmed at just the thought of it of it all. Some folks might even be tempted to opt out, throw their hands in the air and run, claiming a lack of knowledge and skills. But let me tell you from personal experience that when the will to see this through is there, the way will be shown. Just get in there and start. It is amazing to see how we are given the strength and skills to cope in crises situations. Sometimes when I look back at those times when I got the call to be there 24/7 for my father when he was dying of cancer, for my mother when she suffered a massive stroke and lived nine years with her paralysis and for my husband when he required fulltime in home oxygen for his pulmonary fibrosis, before his transfer to continuing care, I really wonder how I got through it all. But I would never think of changing a minute of it.

So how did I do it?

1. Get as much knowledge as you can about the prevailing illness or situation. Ask, ask, ask. You must find out what medical, community resources and specific agencies can help you with the understanding of the disease and the organization of the care giving. Find support groups who have already been there and who can give you ideas, comfort and management tips. Do your research.

2. Set up a binder with all your information, including all medical and home care support names and numbers. Prepare and make photocopies of all medications, and dosages. Take this binder with you to every medical meeting and make a duplicate to have immediately available for paramedics for 911 emergency calls. This way you are not so frazzled when these wonderful medical people ask you all for all the info they need in the midst of your emergency. This binder is also helpful for any homecare staff. Keep a section for ongoing observations and questions. This saves time, helps everyone and gives you a sense of security.
  
3. Call in the reinforcements. I found that most people are more than willing to help if they know exactly *how* they can help. Make a list of several tasks that you do for your loved one. There may be one or two items that other neighbours, friends or family members would be willing to pick up even on an occasional basis if they knew exactly what to do. When we involve the whole family or neighbourhood community in the act of caring for others, everyone shares the responsibility, and everyone wins. The main caregiver feels supported and the wonderful messages that we are sending to our children will always be with them. Children remember our actions more than our words. When children see the love, respect, and support that we give to others with disabilities, the more likely they are to do the same for us in our hour of need.
  
4. If your loved one is in a hospital or other institutional setting, try to create as much of a home-like environment as possible. It's amazing what comfort a few familiar photographs or sentimental objects can bring to another. Any time we must leave a loved one in an institutional setting, we must become their on-site advocate. Being clearly visible to staff and getting to know those who provide the front line care in nursing homes and hospitals can only benefit our loved one. Teamwork and co-operation on behalf of our family member or friend is the only way to ensure quality care.

5. Stay focused on your loved one's **abilities**. What activities or tasks can they still do? If we always focus on another's disability, we begin to look past their actual current abilities and we may contribute to their depression. Staying positive for another amidst their difficulties is a must. We always have a choice when it comes to attitude. Even a bed-ridden person may still be able to perform one or two independent tasks that maintain his sense of dignity. We need to support others to find ways to help to keep as much independent activity and social interaction going as possible. What are their affective needs? It is often the fulfillment of these needs that gives one the will to live.
  
6. Most importantly, take time for yourself. It is only when we put fuel in our tanks that we can give our best to others. This is not a selfish act, but a necessity for both you and your loved one. Just a one week break with a change of scenery will give you that boost you need to continue on. You must have this respite in order to stay emotionally and physically strong for your loved one. You may be all they've got and you may be looking at a long term supportive situation. Your health and welfare must be a priority.

Some of you reading this will already be in a care giving situation. You are not alone. Just know that there are others who have come before you, done what you are doing and now feel privileged to have played such an important part in another individual's life. What a great opportunity we all have to be by the side of those in their most vulnerable state. Seeing the most loved people in my life off to their next one was immensely fulfilling for me. Sharing their last few days with them and their last breath was definitely a sacred moment. It is the best gift any of us could ever give our loved ones. Would we all not want this for ourselves?

For those involved in eldercare these sites may be helpful.

Peel Public Health

<http://www.region.peel.on.ca/health/commhlth/caregiv/cgintro.htm>

The Canadian Health Network Check out seniors

<http://www.canadian-health-network.ca>

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