



Caregiver's Questions and Answers

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Question:

My 57-year-old mother is a whiner. We know for sure that she has some chronic medical issues such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and asthma. She also had a bout with breast cancer, but with chemotherapy, she has been free of cancer for five years. She complains every day about aches, pains and feelings of fatigue and nausea. These aren't new symptoms. My sister and I have heard about the same ailments for the past 20 years. As a result, we have been providing care since we were teenagers and we're tired. Do you think she's faking?

Answer:

She may, or may not, be faking. There is no way you or I can make that call. Is she under a physician's care? If so, make an

appointment as soon as possible for you and your sister to talk about your mother's condition. If she doesn't have a physician, do some research and find a medical professional you can confide in. If you don't know where to turn, ask family and friends for a referral. Myriad conditions are possible considering your mother's poor quality of health. Fibromyalgia is one very difficult condition to pinpoint. Often sufferers interpret mild sensations as pain. Your dilemma of whether or not she is faking is a universal challenge for even the most revered medical professionals. Often drug abuse is seen as the number one reason why patients lie to their physicians about pain. Your mother's condition may be psychological and a cry for help. Your weariness is understandable, but try to muster some compassion and patience until you can get the answers you need to help get your mother on a path to wellness.

Question:

My friend Theresa is caring for her elderly mother and father, and also caring for her own family – a husband and 2 young children. She is terribly overwhelmed and stressed. I have offered my help repeatedly, but she never accepts my offers. I know I'm not the only friend who has asked her if there is something I can do. Others have tried also. Do you have any thoughts on why she won't accept my offers? I just want to lighten her load. She has always been there for me.

Answer:

Often, caregivers have a difficult time accepting help. Oddly enough, they are usually the ones who are the first to help others. They see accepting help as a weakness when, in fact, asking for help is a strength. I have known many caregivers like Theresa. The best way to get her to accept your kindness is to avoid putting her in a position of having to make a decision. As the famous slogan says: Just Do It! Show up on her doorstep with a lovely dinner all prepared and ready to eat. Buy two tickets

to a local movie theater, present them to Theresa and her husband, and be available to babysit that evening. Make her an appointment at a local salon for a manicure and pedicure. Send her a gift card and let her know you'll be there to hold down the fort while she takes a couple of hours to re-energize. By forcing the issue, you will allow your friend to graciously accept your offers without leaving her left with a feeling that she is imposing on you. Theresa is fortunate to have a friend like you.

Question:

Our 12-year-old son Charlie has cystic fibrosis. As his mother, I do everything possible to make his life more comfortable and easy. My husband says I wait on him hand and foot. I don't know if that is true, although it might be. Our problem is that Charlie seems to resent both of us. He makes comments under his breath and is often negative when we try to help. Last week, he actually locked his bedroom door. We were totally panicked until we demanded he open the door, and he did. All of these negative interactions hurt our feelings. We're fearful we'll soon resent Charlie and then our problem will escalate. Since we're in the middle of all this, we can't see what is at the heart of this situation. Are we doing something wrong?

Answer:

Probably so. I don't know of anything more distressing to a child than parents who don't agree and act out. Charlie's resentment might stem from feeling he is in the middle of his parents' discontent. And given that he is ill, this can only be problematic for him. Counseling could certainly help both you and your husband find a common caregiving path and travel it together. If you haven't discussed this with your son's pediatrician, now is a good time to start the conversation. He or she can offer resources close to home. On an additional note, I had the honor of working at a home for terminally ill children and their families.

Those of us on staff recognized that the children who were treated as “normal” children, as opposed to those who were coddled, seemed to adapt and adjust more readily. Finding a middle ground that is comfortable for you, your husband, and most important, for Charlie is possible. Your love for your son shines through your questions. It will also carry you to the answers you are seeking.

Question:

Is there something wrong with this scenario? My 90 year old mother died suddenly 3 months ago. I became the primary caregiver for my 93-year-old father at that time. Within the last 3 months, we cleaned out my mother’s possessions, sold the family home where we all grew up and my dad lived, downsized all of his possessions and then moved him to an assisted living facility. Throughout the whole process, my dad has been positive, grateful and looking to his future. We have dinner every night together and he seems to enjoy my company very much. He eats well, walks every day for exercise, attends church on Sunday and keeps in touch with people he cares about. He and my mother were together almost 70 years and had what I consider a beautiful marriage. Should I be worried that his world is going to cave in any minute?

Answer:

It isn’t often I receive such an interesting question! We never know what the future may bring, but given the information you’ve shared, I would say no, he isn’t going to cave in. It appears there will not be any big surprises or changes in your father’s behavior. If, at 93 years old, he is living a healthy, well balanced life, I can only assess that he has held to that pattern throughout his adult life. Given that he and your mother shared many happy years, he is very fortunate to have much love, care and wonderful memories to draw on. Enjoy every moment with your father. These are sacred times for both of you.

Question:

My mom has been extremely healthy and active all of her life. But now, at 68, I've noticed she is starting to slow down. I worry that she hasn't noticed any difference since her aging has been very slow. I don't know if her affairs are in order and I'm having trouble bringing up the subject. Am I overstepping my boundaries with my concerns? If not, how do I bring up this delicate subject without alienating my mother?

Answer:

Putting your mother's affairs in order is most definitely within your boundaries both as a daughter and as a future caregiver. While the discussion may feel uncomfortable, now is the time to discuss the possibilities and probabilities. Always provide information and suggestions in a gentle, kind way. Let your mother know you have her best interests at heart and want to help her pave the way for a fruitful second half of life. Begin by making a list of your main concerns: driving limitations, health issues, housing, cost of living and long-term care, and most important, end of life and funeral arrangements. Making all of these preparations may be daunting to you as well. Remember there is help. Local social service agencies such as Meals on Wheels offer sustainable services to the elderly in their communities. As the baby boomers age, more and more financial, legal and other services are going to be offered to assist the elderly. The need will be great. At the heart of the issue is the need to remain independent. Assure your mother that you understand this and that you are in this for the long run. Together, you can put together a plan that meets her physical, psychological and emotional needs. And your success provides a blueprint for your children when your time arrives.

*Patricia Smith is a certified Compassion Fatigue Specialist with 20 years of training experience. As founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project© (www.compassionfatigue.org), the outreach division of Healthy Caregiving, LLC, she writes, speaks and facilitates workshops nationwide in service of those who care for others. She has authored several books including *To Weep for a Stranger: Compassion Fatigue in Caregiving*, which is available at www.healthycaregiving.com or Amazon.com.*