



## **Caregiver's Questions and Answers**

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by Patricia Smith

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### **Question:**

I'm heartbroken. I just returned from a visit with my grandparents. My grandma is in the fifth stage of Alzheimer's and my grandpa, now 84, is her sole caregiver. He is mentally and physically exhausted, but he won't put her in an assisted living home. They have been together for more than 60 years and he can't part with her. What can I do to help? What can I suggest that might move him in the right direction of getting the help they both need?

### **Answer:**

Your concern for your grandparents is admirable. Indeed, this is a very sad situation considering how long they have been together. But all is not lost. There are some steps you can take

to help your grandparents and begin to mend your broken heart, as well. Since parting is going to be difficult for them, it is best to facilitate the separation in stages. First, research adult day care facilities in the city where they live. Select facilities that specialize in the care of Alzheimer's patients. Pay a visit to each facility to find the one that you feel best suits the needs of your grandparents. Begin by leaving your grandma a day at a time. Most day care facilities are open Monday – Friday, so your grandpa can have his love home on the weekends. This arrangement will allow them to acclimate to the process of living apart. Gradually add to the time she spends at the day care facility. Knowing she is well cared for, your grandpa will adjust and begin to regain his strength and resiliency, which he will need to continue on. If, eventually, your grandma needs around-the-clock care, the separation won't be as difficult. And don't be worried that your grandpa will have to live the rest of his life alone. He's a lucky man. He has you.

**Question:**

There is no doubt it is time to place my twin sister in hospice care. Needless to say, we are extraordinarily close and I am losing sleep over what will happen to her. I know I should start by visiting hospice facilities close by, but fear and dread are keeping me paralyzed. Can you tell me what to expect to lessen my apprehension?

**Answer:**

Of course, I'll do what I can to help. First of all, it may help you to know your feelings are perfectly normal. You are moving into unknown territory and that alone is bound to cause fear and anxiety. The fact that you are caring for a twin only serves to heighten your emotions. Take a deep breath and take one step at a time. Educate yourself about hospice care by going to [www.hospicenet.org](http://www.hospicenet.org). This non-profit organization displays an

exceptional Q & A on their website that will answer many of your questions. When you are ready for the next step, make an appointment to visit a hospice nearby. Hospice care is provided by a highly experienced team that includes a physician, nurse, social workers, counselors, clergy, therapists and trained volunteers. It is their job to put your mind at ease – and they will. In my experience, I have found hospice workers to be the most compassionate, helpful, dedicated professionals in the caregiving world.

**Question:**

My daughter insists that I fill out an Advance Directive for end of life care. I'm 75 years old and in excellent health. She is insistent that the form has nothing to do with age or health. She has even filled out one for herself! My thought is that it is one more thing to do and I don't see any benefit at all. What do you think?

**Answer:**

I think your daughter couldn't be more right! And I give her kudos for approaching you with this difficult conversation. Completing an Advance Directive assures that a person's last wishes are followed if he or she isn't able to communicate needs. Doctors, nurses and chaplains tell heart-wrenching stories about end of life situations where an advance directive has not been filled out, leaving grieving family members with the task of assessing the best end of life care for their loved one. And all too often, they don't agree. The time to fill out an Advance Directive is now when you are healthy and with all of your faculties. Age isn't a factor. Everyone 18 years and older should fill out a form. To download a form that fulfills the requirements for your state, google the following: Advance Directive Form. Simple instructions are included. Follow them carefully and be sure to visit your Advance Directive from time to time to be sure it still reflects your wishes.

**Question:**

My brother and I have been planning a cruise abroad. He is 68 and now in good health, but had a colostomy two years ago. Unfortunately, he has heard horror stories on the news about people with medical devices or implants experiencing embarrassing situations due to pat-downs. He is very nervous about going through security for fear a pat-down might expose his condition. Is there some way we can avoid going through security? My brother is so worried he is thinking about cancelling the trip.

**Answer:**

Travel can be trying these days, but for those with medical conditions it can be a nightmare. Your brother's fears are well-founded, but as his caregiver, you can put his mind at ease. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) now offers TSA Medical Notification cards. The card tells the screener that the traveler has a health condition, disability or medical device that could affect the screening. There is a blank space where you can fill in his condition. Unfortunately, this card will not exempt your brother from a screening and possible pat-down, but it will notify the screener to be discreet and careful. If you would like to see a template of the card, go to <http://quest.mda.org>. Enter: TSA Notification Card in the Search box or call TSA at 866-289-9673. Bon Voyage!

**Question:**

I help provide care for my great aunt who is now 91. She exhibits depressive symptoms such as diminished appetite, irregular sleep habits, and lack of interest in self care. My family

is worried sick she will harm herself, or worse yet, take her own life. She is hardly ever alone, but things can happen quickly. Are we putting our heads in the sand by not asking her directly?

**Answer:**

Your heads are in the right place, and it's not in the sand. Yes, go ahead and ask. Psychologists tell us it is a myth that bringing up the subject of suicide will hasten the process. While the subject is a complex one, it is best to keep the questions simple: Have you ever thought of harming yourself? Do you wish you could go to sleep and not awaken? If your aunt is nurturing thoughts of ending her life, you need to keep her safe. Bring her directly to your local hospital emergency room. Her loss of interest in life is a call for help. A medical professional will assess whether or not she is suffering from depression, and if she is, help you and your family get her back on track.

*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](http://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](http://www.healthycaregiving.com) or [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).*