

Caregiver Concerns
by Kathryn Daniel
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Do you take your elderly parent to the doctor appointments? Do you occasionally go shopping for the person? Do you help with laundry and tend to his or her pets? A yes to any of those questions makes you family caregiver by the definition of Roberta Farnum, co-owner of Home Instead Senior Care.

According to the statistics, nearly 141,000 people in Mecklenburg County serve as caregivers to a family member, whether the arrangement consists of an adult caring for a senior parent or a senior caring for his or her spouse.

Sings of Stress Coping Techniques

Caregivers are so busy looking after others they neglect themselves, leading to a buildup of stress that eventually surfaces. As listed on the Home Instead Senior Care resource web site, www.caregiverstress.com some signs of stress to watch for are disturbed sleep, headaches, fatigue, chest pains, anxiety, depression, a feeling of isolation and a host of other ailments.

Farnum said factors such as the number of hours spent caregiving, the type of relationship one has with the person, whether the person has dementia, and financial strains all cause caregiver stress.

Farnum offered some coping techniques to combat the effects of caregiver stress. “The number one thing I’d have to say is make sure they’re taking care of themselves first and that means the things always hear about: eat well and exercise,” She said. She offers some other coping techniques as well:

- Find a support group. “Go where you can vent.... Hear about how other people are handling things... Meet people” Farnum said, adding that the web site www.supportworks.org can point local caregivers to a variety of support groups.
- Educate yourself. Farnum said it’s important to learn about your loved one’s condition as well as community resources. She suggested taking a list of questions to doctor’s visits and consulting geriatric care manager to help sort through the lengthy list of resources available. “The more you know, the more control you feel, and it’s not so overwhelming.”
- Take a break. Whether it’s a friend relieving you of duties or a professional you hire from a service such as Home Instead Senior Care, it’s imperative to get out of the home and enjoy time for yourself. According to Farnum, respite care is especially important for those who are caregiving more than 20 hours per week. Go for a walk or treat yourself to a manicure, but don’t use the spare time to run errands for the loved one.

Feeling Sandwiched?

Caring for a family member is complicated enough. However, the stress associated with the role multiple for those who care for their parents and their children. Experts in the field have coined the term “Sandwiched Generation” to describe the increasing number of caregivers who face such circumstances.

According to the report “101 Facts on the Status of Working Women” by the Business and Professional Women’s foundation “Most women will spend 17 years caring for children and 18 years helping an elderly parent.” When a caregiver falls into a “Sandwiched Generation” Farnum said seeking respite care and support groups becomes all the more important.

Alzheimer’s, dementia complicate caregiving

Home Instead Senior Care employs 150 people who go into homes and offer respite to family caregivers. Connie Grant, University City resident in her early 40’s has used the business’s respite care services since March. Caregiver Mary Holly comes to Grant’s home two evenings each week to offer companionship to her 76 year old mother, Martha. Since being diagnosed with dementia in 2002, Martha has needed minor monitoring, said Grant.

Grant usually spend these evenings meeting with clients, but occasionally she’s able to attend support groups or just enjoy the free time for herself.

Grant acknowledged that she experiences stress due to her role as a caregiver and explained her means of coping.

“I try to look at things on a humorous side. I’ve always believed it’s better if you can laugh at things verses cry” she said. “I’ve always tried to explain to other people that it’s like a roller coated ride... You never know what challenges you’re going to face.”

Recently, Grant said her mother was determined to catch a bus and leave. She headed for the door, managed to unlock it, and made her way through the yard. Knowing she to intervene in a way that would not cause agitation to her mother, Grant convinced her that the bus wasn’t running that day. Martha took a nap and the incident was forgotten.

For those caring for loved ones with dementia or Alzheimer’s surprises such as this are at every turn. “It always keeps the day exciting.” Said Grant, further revealing her positive outlook.

However, no matter how bright one tries to remain, caring for a loved one transforming into a stranger takes its toll. “I think the most taking is seeing the changes” Grant admitted. “That person, someone you’ve always known and looked to... is steady losing the ability to make decision.”

Unsung Heroes

There’s one thing Farnum wants the many family caregivers throughout the Queen City to remember: They are not alone. “Asking for help is not an admission of failure” she said “It really is life affirming and necessary.”

With the number of family caregivers on the rise, Farnum says it’s the most relevant dynamic in family trends this century. She saluted the group by saying “I really think that caregivers in our community – paid or unpaid- are using the unsung heroes of our community.”

Want to know more?

In addition to caregivers that ranges from a few hours a week to 24 hour live-in care, Home Instead Senior Care offers special Alzheimer’s and dementia care services. Visit www.homeinstead.com for more information.