

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Dealing with 'Caregiver's Guilt'

Guilt—that pang of conscience, that ache of remorse—can goad us into being better people. In the same way that a body uses pain to signal an injury that needs attending, the conscience can send a message of guilt that forces us to examine our actions; guilty forces us to consider what we have done and what we have failed to do.

All too frequently for the adult child caring for an aging parent, that guilt alarm never stops ringing. That examination of conscience becomes perpetual. The feelings of frustration and inadequacy and doubt never cease.

Sometimes it helps to realize that no matter what you do—no matter how much or how little—the guilt is likely to be there.

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- You feel guilty because you don't stop in and see Mom every day. Or you feel guilty because you're spending too much time helping her and think you're neglecting your spouse and kids.

- You feel guilty because you don't live closer to Dad now that he needs extra help. Or you feel guilty because you're the sibling who does live close by and you're resentful—even jealous—that the others don't know the day-to-day hassles you're facing.

- You feel guilty that Mom gets out of bed and walks to the living room when your sister visits her but she refuses to do that for you. You must be pampering her. Doing too much. Or you feel guilty that she isn't doing well right now. You must be pushing her too hard.

- You feel guilty that sometimes you get mad at Dad because he won't listen to your suggestions. Or you feel guilty that you're not more involved in helping him decide what to do and helping him get it done.

- You feel guilty because Mom wasn't very good at being a parent and you love her but

sometimes you just don't like her. Or you feel guilty because she was a super parent and now she needs your help and you're not coming through for her the way she did for you.

- You feel guilty because you've been a pretty good son or daughter all your life but now, when Dad is really relying on you, you're just not making it. Or you feel guilty because you were pretty wild when you were younger and you didn't listen to him and you know that hurt him.

- You feel guilty that you didn't go into nursing or some other career that would really benefit Mom now. Or you feel guilty that you can help all kinds of people at work—strangers, really—but Mom just drives you up the wall.

- You feel guilty about feeling guilty all the time. Or you feel guilty for giving yourself a break and not feeling guilty.

- And maybe hardest of all, you feel guilty because sometimes you imagine what a relief it will be when Dad has died. And then you can't believe you feel this way.

As if your emotions aren't already stirred up, overworked and muddled enough, your parents, siblings, spouse and kids might not be blameless in this area either.

Mom or Dad knows what buttons to push—the phrase, the gesture, the sigh, the stare—to make you feel guilty, make you feel like a little kid.

And maybe hardest of all, you feel guilty because sometimes you imagine what a relief it will be when Dad has died. And then you can't believe you feel this way.

Brothers and sisters likewise haven't forgotten their sibling's emotional weak spots, and at times, they're not above exploiting that knowledge.

A spouse can pour on guilt.

Children—even little ones—can be masters at using guilt to manipulate their parents.

And society is not shy about showing its disapproval. It would have you believe all the

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Guilt

(Continued from front.)

elderly are poor, lonely, forgotten people because of an adult child's selfishness. And likewise, it claims, placing a loved one in a nursing home—or even considering such a move—is always cruel and immoral.

Remember you can set limits. As Mom's health continues to fail, she's going to need more and more attention, but that does not mean you will be able to continue to match that need. Permit yourself to say, "I can't do that."

While your head may realize these things aren't so, sometimes your heart seems to believe them.

The truth is, even after a parent dies, the guilt can live on.

"I should have"

"I shouldn't have"

"Why did I . . . ?"

"Why didn't I . . . ?"

Guilt can easily become a constant companion and if left unchecked, if allowed to race freely, it continuously feeds the twin fires of exhaustion and anger.

These, then, are some strategies to help keep guilt under control:

- Remember that you are a human being. Like all humans, you are not perfect. Not a perfect spouse. Not a perfect parent. Not a perfect son or daughter. Not perfect at work or home or anywhere else. You will never be a perfect caregiver.

Never.

- Remember you don't have to do everything for an aging parent. It is not required that you meet all Dad's needs yourself. Give away some of that

work. If there isn't enough time to clean his house and make all his meals or if you can't bring yourself to give Dad a bath, there are very competent, qualified people who can do those things. People in social service jobs who provide home and personal care.

Instead, use your time and energy to do those things with him that you really want to do. The things that mean the most to you and to him. The ones that will mean the most to you after he is gone.

Who ever heard of a grieving child say, "No, I didn't get to talk much to Dad near the end but I'm just so thankful I kept his kitchen floor spotless"?

You are not in this alone. Look for formal and informal support. Ask for help from siblings, fellow parishioners, friends, neighbors, the community, and social service professionals.

- Remember you can set limits. As Mom's health continues to fail, she's going to need more and more attention, but that does not mean you will be able to continue to match that need. Permit yourself to say, "I can't do that."

- Remember that sooner is better than later. Don't wait for a crisis to arise before getting supplemental help. Don't wait until you are at—or near— burnout.

- Remember that there are others who are facing the same insurmountable challenges you are. There are support groups available whose members will listen and understand.

- Finally, remember you must accept the fact that no matter how much you do for an aging parent, no matter how well you do it, a parent's health is going to deteriorate. A parent is going to die. This isn't a reflection on you and the quality of care you provide. It's a fact of human nature.

And it's not your fault. □



Prayer to St. John, Patron of Caregivers

Beloved St. John, from the cross Jesus entrusted to you the care of His Blessed Mother. Help me and all those taking care of a loved one who is sick, elderly, disabled or infirm.

Pray for us, that as we go about our many caregiving duties, we may never lose sight of that truth which Christ revealed to His disciples: "Whatever you did for one of these, you did for Me." Amen.



"We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern." Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, (31 a)

