

The Rewards of Caregiving

Gail Gibson Hunt, who directs the National Alliance for Caregiving (NAC) in Washington, D.C., admonishes that caregiving is not a pathology. Even though caregivers *do* experience stress levels higher than those in the general community; and even though they often report painful emotional, physical, social, and financial challenges, most still express great satisfaction in being called to care.

Hunt's organization, along with LifePlans Inc., recently conducted the MetLife Study of Employed Caregivers. It found that employees caring for elderly or sick relatives who have long-term care insurance are almost twice as likely to stay in the workforce as those caring for relatives without it. Employees also reported more quality time and companionship and less stress with hands-on caregiving.

"We see that employees are happier and less stressed when long-term care insurance is there to help them pay for in-home care, respite care, and incidentals to alleviate the work of the caregiver," says Joyce Ruddock, vice president of MetLife's Long-Term Care division.

This study shows that when adult children are able to plan ahead by assuring their parents have purchased long-term care insurance, then caregiving doesn't interfere with their ability to be productive, healthy employees. Balancing work and family responsibilities with a long-term elder care plan in place, these adult children are able to enjoy the rewards of caring for a loved one, rather than suffering only the strains.

In an earlier NAC survey, caregivers reported their biggest reward was knowing that the recipient was well cared for. Caregivers also said they were happy, helpful, grateful, thankful, and loving. These are not uncommon sentiments among caregivers: In fact, many are

able to balance the negative and the positive with fluid grace.

How? They do so by maintaining a positive attitude, accepting each day as it presents itself. Staying open to life through major change is a key element in maintaining joy and health during this midlife rite of passage. Especially when the caregiver values herself as much as the one she is caring for, this becomes a sacred journey for everyone involved.

Filmmaker Elizabeth Sung, who cared for her brother with AIDS, found that caregiving inspired her to follow her dreams of directing and acting rather than to dwell in grief. She says, "There is nothing more important than letting people know they are loved. The caregiving journey is like being reborn again and again because when you are taking care of someone, you are like a guardian soldier. In a short time you become strong beyond what you are usually capable of doing. Out of those experiences you see life and death as a part of the process of life; there is no limit to any one of us. Life is about giving."

Caregiving is most rewarding when families work together. Even so, any caregiver can maximize the journey by following these principles:

- Educate yourself as to community resources and programs.
- Keep the lines of communication open among all family members.
- Take time for yourself, especially to follow principles of good health.

- Keep it simple by asking for help and delegating responsibilities.
- Learn to set limits without putting others out of your heart.
- Believe that your best is good enough.
- Remember that you are asked to care, not to martyr.

Caregiving is a challenge that most families will face at some point, so it is critical to become aware of issues such as finances, insurance, and housing, and to plan ahead wherever possible. From

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Resources

California Partnership for Long-Term Care
(800) CARE445
www.dhs.ca.gov/cpltc

Family Caregiver Alliance
(800) 445-8106 www.caregiver.org

HICAP, (800) 434-0222

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging
Eldercare Locator, (800) 677-1116 www.n4a.org

FURTHER READING:

Marion Karpinski, *Quick Tips for Caregivers*. Medford, Oregon: Healing Arts Communications, 2000.

Beth Witrogen McLeod, *Caregiving: The Spiritual Journey of Love, Loss, and Renewal*. New York: Wiley & Sons, 2000.

Virginia Morris, *How to Care for Aging Parents*. New York: Workman Publishing, 1996.

Vicki L. Schmall, *The Caregiver Helpbook: Powerful Tools for Caregiving*. Portland: Legacy Caregiver Services, 2000.

CAREGIVER WEB RESOURCES:

Administration on Aging
www.aoa.dhhs.gov/agingsites/default.htm

Consumer Health Interactive, www.ahealthyme.com

ElderCare Online, www.ec-online.net

Empowering Caregivers, www.care-givers.com

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a more personal perspective, caregiving can be a special time to build inner strengths and to heal relationships. By stretching our hearts to flow with change, caregiving can become a midlife rite of passage leading to a new sense of vitality and compassion.

As Marin County choreographer Allan Scofield says, "It's such a big process. It's a walk into what you thought was a dark and unfamiliar land, but you find out it's your living room. It's in between picking up your kid from school and going to work the next morning. You will have frustrating times but if you're not established in the poignancy of being here, then you really miss the boat. Caregiving for my father is probably the greatest gift I could have gotten: to love and bless my life."

For more information and free brochures on long-term care planning, contact the California Department of Health Services, California Partnership for Long-Term Care at (800) CARE445.

Beth Witrogen McLeod is a journalist, speaker, and consultant on caregiving, spirituality, and wellness at midlife. Her most recent book is "Caregiving: The Spiritual Journey of Love, Loss, and Renewal" (Wiley, 2000).