

## The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

### Guilt Free Caregiving

All caregivers are struggling or will struggle with feelings of guilt, no matter how hard we're trying to be the best caregiver possible.

Why do we experience guilt? There are 5 reasons that come to mind.

1. **Promises** made in the past come back to haunt us. That promise we made to Dad on his death bed that we'd never put Mom in a home; promises we made to parents that we'd always keep our brother with a disability in our home; promises that we'd never bring a stranger into the house as a caregiver.
2. We are doomed by the thought of "**coulda**", "**woulda**", "**shoulda**". I coulda done more; I shoulda done more; if only I knew, I woulda done more.
3. We are all **poor communicators**. We try to read the mind of the person for whom we care. We expect them to know what we're thinking. We make assumptions about meanings. We don't seek clarification and then, we wonder why the things we do aren't meeting the needs of the person for whom we care, and why the things they say and do often displease us.
4. Then, we feel guilty for being **angry** with them. Anger is the primary source of our guilt. Expressing anger toward the care recipient always creates guilt, but the unexpressed anger that we swallow causes even more guilt.
5. Lastly, some of us were raised in a **culture** where guilt is ingrained. Nothing we do is ever quite good enough. We are never able to rest on our laurels. We know it could have been done better. So, we feel guilty.

There are 24 hours in a day and, in an ideal world we could spend all 24 caring for the person we love. We'd create a warm, loving, supportive, nurturing relationship where we would never feel guilty because everything we do is done perfectly. But in fact, we live in a less than ideal world. In addition to being a caregiver, most of us are also involved with spouses, parents, children, grandchildren, siblings and in-laws.

Most caregivers are also employed with jobs that keep us away from the home for 9 hours a day. Most of us have a home that requires daily attention. Someone must do the laundry, shop, prepare the meals, clean the bathroom, feed the dog and all the other tasks that are necessary to keep a home functioning. If you do all these things, daily, you've probably spent 14 hours of the 24 available to each of us. What's left for caregiving? Ten hours, if you give up sleeping. If you also have your own medical appointments, responsibilities outside the home and job, such as church, PTA, politics, family gatherings, you have even less time to be a caregiver. How can you possibly do your best as a caregiver with all these constraints? It's no surprise that you don't feel that you've done enough, or that what you've done isn't good enough. Hence the guilt.

What can you do to eliminate things from the list of "must dos"? NOTHING!

Everything needs to be done. You're like a batter caught between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> base. No matter which direction you go you're going to get tagged out. Guilt comes creeping in again. It comes with the territory of caregiving. Accept it, but sometimes the guilt is too much. It's important for caregivers to recognize the signs when caregiving is too much and take action. Unresolved guilt can lead to depression. Know the signs of depression. Watch for headaches, disturbed sleep. Can't fall asleep, perhaps can't sleep through the night, maybe just wanting to sleep all day. Notice if you're easily upset. Either crying with little cause or angry a lot of the time. Are you having difficulty concentrating on things, remembering things, making decisions? Do you feel overwhelmed. Do you feel hopeless. These are all signs that the guilt is more than you can manage and you're depressed. What do you do?

**Recognize the signs in yourself.** Monitor your feelings regularly and take action when you see the signs. It's essential for your physical and mental health and for the future care of your loved one.

What actions can you take? First, let go. **Simplify your lifestyle.** Let go of the notion that meals are cooked perfectly, balanced perfectly with a loving family gathered around a perfectly set dining room table. Sometimes, pizza delivery in a cardboard box gets the job done and saves you hours of time. Learn to lower your standards. You're not perfect and will never be. You can learn to live with "good enough". You'll have more time for caregiving that is loving and nurturing if it

doesn't also have to be perfect. If your mother's hair isn't washed every week without fail, and instead you spend that time looking at a family photo album with her, she'll feel happy and you might also get the benefit of sharing a happy moment instead of a chore-filled moment. You are still making memories, try to make some that are happy and not just duty-filled.

**Ask for help.** Caregivers always say there's no one who can help me: everyone is busy, has a job, has family responsibilities. We make excuses for other people without giving them the benefit of making their own choices. Remember, we are poor communicators. We don't actually ask many people for help we just assume that they can't/won't help and we feel angry that we have no help. Instead, sit down and draw up a list of everyone you can think of who you ever helped. Then create another list of everyone your care recipient ever helped. I guarantee you it's a long list. People who are selected to be caregivers are chosen because they have a history of helping others. People know they can be relied upon. The lists you created are your potential pool of helpers. Next begin to think about all the things you do in a given day or week. Itemize them, with specifics. Caregivers tend to speak in global terms. "I'm just so busy, there isn't time for anything", but there are no specifics, so no one knows how to help you. Make a detailed list about each and every thing and how often it has to be done and how long it takes to accomplish. Now you can begin to ask for help.

No one wants to sign up to take over your role as a caregiver, but almost everyone on the list would be willing, if asked, to pick up your mother's medications once a month at the pharmacy. That's one less task for you to do. Almost everyone you, or she, ever helped would be willing to stop over once a month for an hour and visit with your Mom so you can have an hour of alone time. What you'll find, if you actually do it, is that the person you ask will thank you for the opportunity to help. People want to help. They want to feel valued. No one wants to take it all on but a little help here and there, when accumulated can give a caregiver a respite break. I remember when my husband was confined to the house and shouldn't be left alone the entire day, but I had to work to pay the bills, women from my church would stop by and read the daily Bible readings with him. Each one took a turn. He looked forward to it so much and I had the peace of mind that someone was stopping in to see him. People can't help you if you don't ask.

**Avoid negativity.** Negativity is contagious and caregivers are vulnerable to negative thoughts and feelings because they tend to be a bit overwhelmed by their responsibilities and a bit angry about the turn their lives have taken. Negative people drag you down. Stay away from nasty people, sarcastic people. Try to surround yourself with people who are optimistic, compassionate, and funny. Nothing relieves stress like a good belly laugh. Make it your business to find something to laugh about each day. I have a friend who trolls social media sites looking for humor and she sends me a daily laugh. Sometimes they make me laugh out loud. It helps me maintain perspective about the things in life that are truly important and helps me to give up worrying about the small stuff.

At the end of each day ask yourself, "Have I done all I could today, given the time, talent and resources I have?" If you can answer yes, you've done enough. The question isn't "Did I do a perfect job?" or "Was I the best at what I did?". Just did I do the best I could in the reality of the world in which I live.

Published in partnership with Caregiver.com.

Written by [Dr. Beverly Kidder](#), Staff Writer.

Contact the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington at 360-694-8144 or [ClarkADRC@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:ClarkADRC@dshs.wa.gov) to learn more about supports available to family caregivers. Article content is provided by Active Daily Living.