

CARING FOR YOUR AGING LOVED ONES – Pamphlet Version
Monica and Bill Dodds

If you're a family caregiver, we thank you for what you do. It may never have occurred to you that *caregiving is pro-life*. Your compassion, dedication, and hard work are testimonies to the value of human life.

There is a spiritual component to the vocation of caregiving but there are also the nitty-gritty details. We've learned that while every situation is unique, there are common, basic issues for both the caregiver and the care-receiver.

From a Caregiver's Point of View:
A Better Understanding of What You're Going Through

Anger

The stress of caregiving can unleash a torrent of unexpected emotions and bring challenges that often have no clear solutions.

Look for a support group or good friend where you can "dump" some of that anger.

Forgive yourself. Go back and apologize.
You can start over again.

Guilt

It helps to realize that no matter what you do—no matter how much or how little—you are likely to feel guilty.

Remember that you're not perfect.

Know that you can set limits. Don't wait for a crisis to arise before getting supplemental help.

Exhaustion

Exhaustion is more than just being tired. It's being tired for weeks, being tired for months.

Don't deny the problem. Admit that being

exhausted isn't good for you personally or for you as a caregiver. An exhausted caregiver can't be a good caregiver.

Give yourself a tiny break. A minute or two. Go into the bathroom, shut the door and wash your face with cool water. Taking a day off may seem impossible, but you can take a one-minute break. Get help. Ask family members to assist. Look into respite care. Even a few hours once a week can help a lot. Consider joining a caregivers' support group. Many caregivers find it extremely beneficial. In some cases care for your parent is offered while you attend the group.

Respite Care

"Respite care" means a break for someone who is taking care of an ill person, a rest for the person primarily responsible for the well-being of another. A primary caregiver needs to take breaks or soon will burn out.

Admit that caregiving is a complicated experience.

Remember that the break is for you. Don't fill the time running errands for the person in your care, going grocery shopping, getting the car fixed, and so on.

To find someone to help you with respite care, check with the local Catholic social service agency, ask at the parish or contact a local program. Ask for help from family members, fellow parishioners, friends, neighbors, the community, and social service professionals. Many people would like to help but don't know what you need. Let them know specifically what they can do.

From a Care-Receiver's Point of View:
A Better Understanding of What Your Loved One is Experiencing

Independence, Control and Self-Determination

Your loved one values his or her independence and many decisions you and he or she make revolve around this key concept.

Encourage and allow independence. Don't take over tasks or make decisions your loved one can still handle.

Losses and Grief

Quite often, what your loved one is feeling is a tremendous sense of loss—in so many areas. As a caregiver, you are helping your loved one cope with a succession of losses.

Usually the biggest loss of all is the death of a spouse. Grief involves a host of feelings. It's commonly accepted there's a "cycle of grief."

Realize that as your loved one ages (or health deteriorates), he or she becomes unable to perform the everyday tasks that person used to love and may feel a part of his or her identity is being lost.

Changes in Roles

A role reversal (an adult child assuming some of the duties of an aging parent) or an assumption of new roles (taking over responsibilities formerly handled by one's spouse) is rarely an easy transition.

Go slowly. Be gentle. Don't suddenly charge in and take control. Start with small things. If at all possible, let your loved one still play a part.

Your loved one is experiencing losses and understandably feels frightened. You've lost something too. As he or she grows older or sicker and loses more abilities, you're losing the person who once comforted you.

"I don't want to be a burden"

Care-receivers are often concerned about "being a burden." Your loved one might bring up the subject when you're feeling angry, upset or frustrated.

Admit that what you're doing is hard. Look for outside support.

Realize that your loved one may need to be reassured more than once.

See if there's some small part of a bigger task your loved one can do to feel like he or she is helping out at least a little bit.

Let your parent or spouse know that providing care is something you want to do. Yes, there are hectic moments, but you see taking care of him or her as a privilege.

Spirituality: A Better Understanding of Your Vocation

God has chosen you to play a central role in providing that care. Just as from the cross Jesus asked St. John—the patron saint of caregivers—to take care of his Blessed Mother, God asks you to help take care of someone else He deeply loves.

What you're doing is a prayer, and the path you and your loved one are taking is a pilgrimage.

It is the Father asking you to help his son or daughter along these final stages of that journey.

It is the Son who has told us whatever we do for those in need we do for him.

And it is the Spirit who is with you right now. It is the Spirit who will never leave you.

God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, will richly bless you and your loved one in this life, and in the life to come.

Monica and Bill Dodds are the founders of the Friends of St. John the Caregiver: www.fsjc.org. Monica is the author of A Catholic Guide to Caring for Your Aging Parent (Loyola Press) from which this material was taken.

The full-length version of this article is posted at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/dodds.pdf>