Grieving a Loved One With Alzheimer’s

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Grieving a Loved One

Whether Alzheimer’s is targeting your grandparent, parent, spouse or friend, it is a negative force. It can significantly interrupt your relationship with the person, and in turn, disturb your own mood and psychological well-being.

Their symptoms, level of functioning and perceived happiness will likely trigger symptoms in you. When they are doing well, you will feel relief, at ease and peaceful. When their symptoms are worse, you will feel increased apprehension, depression and overall stress.

Of course, the focus during Alzheimer’s treatment should be on the patient. Pay attention to yourself, though. If you find yourself in a caregiver position, you will need to address your needs as well as theirs. If you cannot take care of yourself, how can you possibly take care of them?

Self-Care for Caretakers

The caretaker role is extremely important while being extremely challenging. The well-being of your loved one is directly related to your well-being. Help yourself to help them. Here’s how:

Be Sensible

Take an honest look at the risks you fear. What are your fears? What are your fears for your loved one? Once you identify your concerns, you can take practical steps towards resolution.

Some type of door alarms or home security are sensible if you are concerned about him or her wandering away from home. If you are worried about safety within the home, find ways to make the environment less dangerous by removing unneeded cleaning chemicals. Investigate common problems facing people with Alzheimer’s like issues with the stove or financial concerns to prepare yourself.

Making modifications to reduce the risk in the home will lessen the stress and distraction you experience while away from your loved one. You will be refreshed and motivated upon your return.

Be Realistic

Having expectations based in reality will save you valuable resources. Think about what is realistic now and what is realistic in the long-term. Can you really work a fulltime job, take care of your kids and care for your ailing loved one simultaneously? It seems that doing all of this will increase your stress and decrease your overall well-being.

If you set your expectations too high, you feel failure and disappointment when the goal is not accomplished. Clearly list what role you are comfortable taking. Revise this list often and avoid being too rigid. Realistic

expectations will change with the symptoms and functioning of your loved one.

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Self-Care for Caretakers

Be Protected

The best way to protect yourself in this process is by implementing good boundaries. People with good boundaries say “no” in situations that are problematic. They are interested in the long-term accomplishment of the goal.

If the journey of Alzheimer’s is new to you, establish rigid boundaries. Too many people get into the habit of saying “yes” early on while not expressing their true thoughts and feelings. This creates problems later, as others begin to expect certain things from you. It is far easier to loosen boundaries later than it is to tighten them.

Be Selfish

Finding time for yourself and ways to recharge in your downtime is crucial. Do not make the mistake of thinking that best way to relax is staring at the TV from the couch. This coping skill is more neutral or negative than positive.

Focus your energies towards seeking out positive experiences with uplifting people. Go pleasurable places, eat a good meal and get a massage. Find some way to bring humor and laughter into your life.

Be Holistic

In this case, holistic means paying attention to your life in its entirety. If the only focus you have is on your loved one with Alzheimer’s, the other aspects of your will suffer. Attention to the older generation will result in fewer resources available to the younger generation.

Spend time with your children to maintain an effective relationship. Balance work with home life by using high levels of communication at your place of employment. Being a caretaker is a juggling act. Keep all your balls in the air.

Be Aware

Burnout is a major concern for anyone dealing with the Alzheimer’s of a loved one. Burnout is caused by overexerting yourself and draining all of your physical, emotional and financial resources caring for others.

Even if you follow these tips precisely, burnout can still walk into your life. Burnout will bring symptoms of depression and anxiety. Track yourself and your symptoms. Sleep, diet and exercise will be good indicators of your burnout or well-being.

Be a Team

Providing any level of care for someone with Alzheimer’s is intense job. Doing it alone fuels the fire of burnout. Accept help and assistance often. If none has been offered, use your best assertive communication to ask for help.

Asking for help does not mean you are failing. The only failure is allowing yourself to suffer. If you continue to be denied, it may be time for professional help. This is not giving up. It is, in fact, a commitment to provide best level of care for your loved one.

Next page: grief and mourning.

Grief and Mourning

Early in the process, people in your life will be scrambling to care from the loved one with Alzheimer's. In doing so, they run the risk of not paying attention to their own needs.

The self-care tips on the previous pages will help you avoid burnout and other stress-related disorders, but it is only step one. Step two is grieving the loss. Though your loved one is still actively in your life, the way that you view them is changed forever and it is both healthy and normal to experience grieving a loved one.

If you do not adjust to the change, you will become stuck in denial, depression, anger or bargaining while never reaching acceptance. The steps to acceptance should not be avoided. Instead, embrace them through acknowledging the loss and finding new directions. Here's how:

- **Move through denial** – Having a clear diagnosis of Alzheimer's can take years after symptoms start and symptoms will come and go over time. This is a breeding ground for denial. Work through denial by acknowledging the current state of your loved one. Talk openly about it with others to cement it as fact.
- **Move through anger** – When denial is addressed, anger is a likely reaction. Forget the flawed notion that anger is bad or unwanted. Anger has a bad reputation because people tend to suppress their feelings for too long leading to an explosive burst of anger later where feelings are hurt and relationships broken. Find new ways to implement exercise and physical activity to channel the feeling into productive actions. You may have good luck releasing anger through art, journaling or breaking things. Finding an outlet for anger is another step towards acceptance.
- **Move through depression** – A loss is sad. When people see loved ones struggle, a number of thoughts are experienced. Write down your thoughts that contribute to depression. Are you worried about the future? Are you worried that you will receive the diagnosis yourself? Debate and challenge these thoughts to arrive at conclusions that make sense and will add to happiness.
- **Move through bargaining** – Bargaining is the process of making a deal, usually with God, in an attempt to remove the stress from your life. You tell God that you will be the best Christian if only He will allow you loved one to live longer or be symptom-free. Bargaining is an attempt to take control over something that is fully out of your hands. Once you realize the control is not yours, you can move to the next step.

- **Move to acceptance** – You must accept the things you cannot change. You cannot make Alzheimer's go away. You cannot alleviate symptoms. Acceptance is not only acknowledging the diagnosis, but also in understanding the widespread influence it has on your life now and will in the future. Another part of acceptance is putting time, energy and effort into what you can control. If you feel that you have found some level of acceptance, refocus on self-care.

Conclusion

Having a loved one diagnosed with Alzheimer's puts you in an interesting situation as few diseases impact the family and friends as much as this one. Being active is always better than being passive. Taking time to place yourself as a priority allows you the opportunity to maintain all facets of your life. Along the way, work to move through the loss process. Finding acceptance does not mean you like the situation. It means that you are invested it doing what you feel is best. Acceptance is always best.