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Caregiver Connections

In Sickness and in Health: Vows of the Responsible Caregiver

by Paula Gibson, Regional Director of Communications and Engagement for Azura Memory Care

As a caregiver for someone with memory loss, it is easy to think that you are the only one responsible for your loved one's care. That ultimately, you are in the battle alone and must provide everything from intermittent assistance to daily hands-on care.

This thought process is very common among caregivers and can be the result of family dynamics, because you are the only child, or have siblings who are not overly helpful. It can also be because you are the spouse and have taken vows to care "in sickness and in health."

Whatever the reason, caregivers ultimately determine that they are an army of one; however, it is important to realize that being a lone soldier does not always have to happen. In many instances, when it comes to families, no one is equipped with ESP and clear communication is key!

Brother or daughter may recognize the need to stay with Mom, but if asked would. If they say, "no," ask "why?" You may find they aren't comfortable staying due to Mom's incontinence issues, but perhaps they would be willing to mow the lawn or take care of Mom's finances and ease a different burden for you.

Let's face it, not everyone is cut out to be a hands-on caregiver, at least not a compassionate and patient one. Therefore, it is important that caregivers recognize ways for those around them to comfortably help shoulder some of the responsibilities. As a result, it will help lessen the caregiving load, but often these individuals have to be asked before they will feel it OK to assist.

It is also important that we realize that being responsible for our loved one's care does not always take on the form of actually doing the care ourselves. Ultimately, being responsible means finding appropriate ways that our loved can have their needs met safely while providing them with the highest quality of life.

Often spouses have the toughest time letting this responsibility go, as they feel it relates directly to that sacred wedding vow "in sickness and in health." However, it is imperative that one realizes that those vows did not dictate or define "where" this should occur.

In fact, the vow states that one would continue to "have and to hold" or to love and be a partner to their spouse regardless of their health. It does not say that they must be solely responsible to give medications, assist with toileting or bathing or lift them from a bed to wheelchair or keep them at home until the end, especially if that environment jeopardizes their or their spouse's well being.

With other diseases, such as cancer, we look to the experts for help, treatment and even care. However, with dementia, there is the ever-present belief it can be handled by "family," but according to the Alzheimer's Association, 63% of caregivers will pass away before the person they are giving care to.

When one responsibly evaluates what care their loved one needs and who would be the best trained to provide that care, only then are they truly fulfilling that sacred vow.

Caregiving may not always result in the picture of care we or others think or feel we should provide, nor is it done alone or always at home. However, only we walk in our shoes and only we are responsible for choosing the best options to care for our loved one.

The vow we must take as caregivers is to recognize:

- 1) What our loved ones' needs truly are – physically, medically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, socially?
- 2) Who can **best** meet these needs?
- 3) Where can these needs **best** be met?
- 4) When does help need to be sought?

Our responsibility is to ensure our loved one is getting the best care and living the highest quality of life possible. Where and by whom is not dictated in a ceremonial vow. However, as caregivers, that is what we should vow to do.

Paula Gibson is the Regional Director of Communications and Engagement for Azura Memory Care where she has served for over a decade. She is a Certified Dementia Practitioner, Certified Virtual Dementia Tour Trainer, Certified Challenging Behaviors in Dementia Trainer and Certified Provider of Cognitive Stimulation. Paula was also a caregiver to her grandmother and father, who passed due to dementia.