



Aging Happens: Upcoming class for caregivers teaches 'How to take care of you'

By Ellen Waldman

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Caregiving for another person is no joke. Just because we love and care about the person does not make the job any easier.

The Family Caregiver Alliance (caregiver.org) says: "About 44 million Americans provide 37 billion hours of unpaid, 'informal' care each year for adult family members and friends with chronic illnesses or conditions that prevent them from handling daily activities such as bathing, managing medications or preparing meals on their own. Family caregivers, particularly women, provide over 75% of caregiving support in the United States. Caregiver services were valued at \$450 billion per year in 2009."

This does not even address the number of hours lost at work for those needing to provide this care. It is very obvious that the well-being of these caregivers is extremely important. If they go down, the whole support system can fall apart. Not to mention the drain on their own health and resources along the way. What to do?

Once again, the Rogue Valley Council of Governments (RVCOG.org) has a wonderful offering for family caregivers of older adults. Here is the info from their brochure: "The Rogue Valley Council of Governments is offering a workshop for caregivers called 'Taking Care of You: Powerful Tools for Caregiving.' This is an educational program designed to help these caregivers. During the six-week course, participants discover the importance of self-care as they develop personalized action plans. They acquire tools to reduce stress; communicate effectively with family members and service providers; diminish guilt, anger and depression; and make tough decisions. Caregivers also receive a comprehensive Caregiver Helpbook, developed specifically for this class. Instructors are specially trained leaders and caregivers who have successfully adopted the techniques they teach."

The next workshop is scheduled for 1:30 to 4 p.m. on six Wednesdays, Sept. 9 to Oct. 14, at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, 426 W. 6th Street, Medford. The cost is \$22. (This suggested donation for the book is to help defray book costs, but not required.) To register, call Liz Axness at 541-618-7865 or email liz.axness@state.or.us. Here is the link to the class: http://rvcog.org/MN.asp?pg=SDS_Powerful_Tools.

Here are some additional questions and answers from Sandy Divine, case manager, a member of this RVCOG team:

Q: What are some examples of medical difficulties which can cause people to become a care receiver? (Many other programs are specifically for those who have some form of cognitive impairments, only.)

A: We have had all kinds of medical conditions — cancer, kidney failure, car accident injuries, and dementia of all kinds, to name a few.

Q: What are some of the most common difficulties for caregivers that this program addresses?

A: The feelings of isolation, loss, stress, and depression are some of the most common difficulties for caregivers. (I would add that they often feel some guilt around having these feelings. Plus, plain old exhaustion.)

Q: Is there additional help available to attendees once this class ends? Are they referred to other resources in the community?

A: We have a resource table at every class, and most classes decide to attend ongoing support groups. We also have had several groups that formed their own support group.

Q: How many people are in the classes?

A: The class is designed for 10 to 14 attendees. This allows enough time for sharing, and honoring the start and end times.

Q: How long has this program been offered?

A: This class has been offered by RVCOG since fall 2002.

Q: Does the person you're caring for need to live in your home?

A: No, the person doesn't have to live in their home. We have had many long-distance caregivers take the class, because there are still caregiver feelings and difficulties living long-distance.

Q: What else do you want to get across to those who provide care?

A: We want the caregivers to know that they are not alone and there are many resources available.

Another great resource for caregivers, near or at a distance, is The National Institute on Aging (www.nia.nih.gov). It offers a 40-page booklet called, "So Far Away," created for those caring long-distance. To order publications, go to www.nia.nih.gov/health or call 800-222-2225. They have a ton of other great info on caregiving you can either read online or order to receive by mail.

My strong recommendation to families in this role is to not put themselves last in line. Caring for the caregiver is not an option, it's a necessity. Please do take good care.