Practicing patience with aging parents



It's not easy watching your parents age. The father who once swept you onto his shoulders now has trouble walking and the mother who kept everyone organized now forgets her doctor's appointments. The people you depended on for so many years now depend on you. Your aging parents' resistance, denial, criticism and even anger may be making things even harder. It's sometimes difficult not to get frustrated, annoyed and impatient at the people you love the most.

Developing patience

It is said that patience is the companion of wisdom. How can we acquire the wisdom needed to be calmer, more compassionate caregivers?

Begin by acknowledging your own fears and anxieties. Witnessing your parents' physical and cognitive decline can be heartbreaking. It also makes you face your own mortality and fears of your own future. Ask yourself if it's your parents' behaviour or your own sadness and anxiety that's causing you to become impatient.

Then start identifying what triggers your impatience. This isn't always apparent because impatience often seems to appear out of nowhere. Try keeping a journal for a few weeks. Whenever you feel overwhelmed, frustrated or annoyed, write down what's happening in your life. You'll soon see what events and situations cause you to feel frustrated or exasperated and knowing the triggers makes you better able to deal with them.

Finally, try to see things from your parents' point of view. They are also feeling anger about their declining strength, frustration with their limitations, anxiety about losing their independence and fears about dying. You may be frustrated by your mother's inability to remember things but so is she. Caregiving is tough but so is aging.

The practice of patience

No matter how great your love, caregiving can try your patience – especially when you're also dealing with your own demanding personal and professional responsibilities. Expressing annoyance or anger directly to your parents may make them feel insecure and cause them to become defensive or withdraw. Instead, try some of the following strategies:

- **Slow down and breathe!** Try not to insist on getting things done *now*. No matter how busy you are, some things can't be rushed. If you start feeling annoyed or upset, stop and take three really deep breaths before you react. Inhale until your whole chest and stomach expand with your breath and then exhale slowly and completely. Deep breathing has been proven to help settle your nerves. If you find yourself becoming extremely frustrated, excuse yourself for a few minutes, go to the bathroom, drink a glass of cold water and wash your face. Separating yourself physically for a moment can help you gain control over your emotions.
- **Smile.** Fake it if you have to. It's hard to stay angry with a smile plastered on your face – it may also help your parent feel better too.
- **Stop trying to be perfect.** Setting unrealistic expectations only results in more stress, frustration and guilt. Frustration often arises out of trying to control an uncontrollable circumstance. Distinguish between *what you can change or control and what you can't and remember you are human and will make mistakes.* Be as gentle with yourself as you are with others.
- **Practice gratitude.** No matter how frustrated you may feel, there's always something for which you can be grateful. For example, instead of becoming annoyed by the repeated questions from a parent with dementia, be grateful for what they're teaching you: patience, resourcefulness, acceptance, empathy, courage and forgiveness.
- **Find ways to express your feelings**. Caregivers need support too. Talk to friends and family members, join a caregiver's support group (either online or in-person) and if you're feeling

overwhelmed, seek counselling. Contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program for information, resources in your area and local counselling services.

Caring for an aging parent can be very rewarding. It can also be physically and emotionally exhausting. Taking care of yourself is perhaps the most important thing you can do as a caregiver. Get enough sleep, eat a healthy diet, exercise and find time for fun. Be as ready as you can to treasure the moments.