Balancing Work and Elder Care-Giving

Many people become caregivers unexpectedly, due to an injury or the illness of an elderly relative. It's no wonder then, that so many people are unprepared for this new role, unaware of what services are available, what the costs will be, and exactly what is involved in elder care-giving. Therefore, unlike caring for children, caring for older adults can become more challenging and complex over time.

Challenges and Rewards

Caring for an older adult can be physically and emotionally demanding. There are the everyday tasks such as preparing meals, shopping and cleaning. There may be a need to help with personal care—such as bathing, medication, etc. But care-giving also includes providing—and sometimes receiving—emotional support. This is the rewarding part—talking, laughing, sharing, and spending quality time with your older relative.

With all of the associated challenges and rewards, the elder care-giving role must be put into perspective. It takes planning and discipline to ensure this role is balanced with your other responsibilities, and personal leisure time.

Tips for Balancing Roles

- **Define and understand your care-giving role.** What exactly will you be doing? How much time is involved? Where can you find support?
- **Prepare for this new role.** Educate yourself on your older relative's condition so you know what will be involved, now and later.
- **Develop a plan to get the support you need.** Do you need someone to help clean? Should you arrange for adult daycare? Could someone else take your older relative to medical appointments?
- **Determine the level of care required.** E.g., nurse, companion, homemaker, and decide who can best provide the support.
- **Cost it out.** Don't forget to consult the older relative's insurance to see if coverage exists.
- **Ask for and accept help.** Ask children or partners to help out. At work, ask for assistance juggling schedules or priorities. Ask relatives, friends or neighbours to lend a hand.
- **If appropriate, have the older relative help out things that need doing.** If they are up to it (and only if they are up to it), would they like to help out with caring for young children, fixing some meals?
- **Take care of yourself.** Try to get enough sleep; eat well and take time to exercise regularly.

Coping with Care-Giver Stress

Caring for an older adult, while juggling work and family responsibilities can be emotionally and physically exhausting. The effects can range from altering routines, changing or foregoing vacation plans, having less time for social activities, changing or leaving jobs to affects on your own health. Close to one quarter of caregivers indicate they have had health problems and changed sleep patterns. This highlights the importance of ensuring that caregivers also care for their own health and emotional well-being.

Coping Strategies

- **Take a break!** Schedule time for relaxation by yourself. If needed, you can arrange "respite care" to provide assistance while you take time for yourself.
- **Seek emotional support.** Talk to friends, relatives or join a support group of other elder caregivers.
- **Set limits.** Determine what you are capable of handling and be sure to avoid "burnout".

Caregiver Support

There are many support services that can help ease an elder caregiver's responsibilities. These include:

- Homecare services
- Transportation services
- Adult daycare
- Meals on Wheels
- Respite care services
- Social daycare—community, recreational activities
- Nursing services

You may be happy to help your older relative, but torn between the demands of work, family and your ability to provide adequate care to them. You're not alone in your struggle. As people live longer, there is a growing population of older adults and at the same time dwindling social and health resources. This means that increasingly, adult children are caring for their aging parents. Take note of the resources available to assist you, and whatever your responsibilities, be sure to take care of yourself as well.