

The Caregiver Link

April, 2009

QUOTES

No matter how long the winter, spring is sure to follow.
~Proverb

April is a promise that May is bound to keep.
~Hal Borland

In the spring I have counted one hundred and thirty-six different kinds of weather inside of four and twenty hours.
~Mark Twain

The first day of spring is one thing, and the first spring day is another. The difference between them is sometimes as great as a month.
~Henry Van Dyke

How Do You Decide When to Call In a Professional?

Martha called last week with a confused tone to her voice: “I visited Mom and Dad over the weekend, and noticed that Dad had gotten more frail again. He has been getting around OK with the help of a walker, but it’s been hard for him to get into a bathtub. Mom helps as much as she can, but it’s all she can do to keep the medications straight. They’ve had meals brought in for the last year, and that’s great, but I think it’s time for a lot more services than that. Mom and Dad feel they are doing OK, and are resistant to my suggestions. What should I do?”

About Martha...

Martha is in her mid-50s, teaching a few classes at the local university and working as a consultant in the alternative healing arts. Her parents live in another state, about 5 hours away. Martha is their only child and she visits at least once a month to keep up their close connection and to help in any way she can. Martha has been uneasy about her parents’ ability to care for themselves—but she hasn’t wanted to interfere or hurt their feelings. When signs of poor personal hygiene combined with piles of laundry in a disorderly house greeted her on this visit, Martha felt it was time for change. She wants some information on when is the right time to bring in professional help. Martha wants to help her parents; she just doesn’t know how.

What Are The Issues?

To start with, Martha is facing the challenge of being a long-distance caregiver. Because she is not there everyday, she notices the differences in her parents’ health and ability to function when

she visits. She worries that her parents may fall or become ill because they are not taking care of themselves as well as in the past.

Her parents, on the other hand, have become accustomed to their present state. They may not like it and wish their ability to care for themselves were better, but they are not ready to admit that they need outside help. It’s frightening to think of bringing “strangers” into their home and they are worried that they



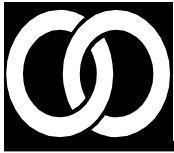
won’t have enough money to pay for help. What about “later” when they might really need help? Martha’s parents may also be feeling some shame and embarrassment at losing their independent lifestyle and abilities, and so are resistant to asking for and receiving help.

Rushing in to take control could be a disaster for both Martha and her parents. It is important to maintain their independence and dignity, just as she must balance her own work and family situations with giving care to her parents.

First Steps

- ◆ Martha might begin by determining if the situation is a risk to her parents’ health or safety. If yes, then it is important for Martha to quickly begin the process of getting professional help. A call to her parents’ physician would be a good place to start. Together they can assess the needs and build a care plan.
- ◆ If health and safety are not in immediate danger, Martha might use a daily tasks appraisal checklist to assess her parents’ current status. Such a checklist can

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Ask the Expert

Hiring the right caregiver to care for yourself or someone you love can be challenging. Every caregiving situation is unique, and it's got to be the right fit. Understanding your role as an advocate (either for yourself or your loved one), clearly assessing your needs, asking the right questions, and establishing clear expectations and boundaries from the beginning can be the key to making sure you get the most out of your home care situation.

Where should I start when looking for a quality caregiver?

One of the keys to finding the right caregiver is to first carefully assess your own needs. What exactly will the caregiver need to do? Are your needs limited to laundry, meal preparation or light housekeeping? Or do you or your loved one need assistance with personal care, like bathing or getting dressed? Assessing your needs beforehand will make sure that your caregiver will be physically able to do what is required and has the right training. The Area Agency on Aging in our area, Senior Resources, is a great place to start. They can help connect you with a reputable home health care agency. In some cases, they can even send out a trained nurse or social worker to help assess the needs of you or your loved one.

What should I look for in a home care agency?

Make sure that the agency performs criminal background checks and that they bond and insure their employees. You want to be sure that the person coming into your home does not have a criminal background and that you or your loved one won't be in any way liable if the caregiver is hurt while in your home. Also, be sure you know and understand the agency's policies. What will happen if your caregiver calls in sick? Will the agency have someone else qualified to fill in at the last minute? What is the process if you have concerns or are having a problem with your quality of care?

What traits should I look for in an individual caregiver?

Just as you would with any other person you were thinking of hiring, you want the caregiver to be on time, polite, clean and free from drug or alcohol dependence. You may also want to consider whether or not they seem to be an effective communicator or if they appear to enjoy what they are doing. Caregiving can be a difficult job. Enthusiasm for what they are doing and a true desire to care for others will go a long way in making sure the relationship is a good one.

How can I make sure I get the most out of a caregiving situation?

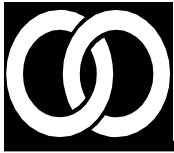
Make sure that you are your own advocate. Play an active role in directing your care or the care of your loved one. The agency may know the general services that you require, but you may need to be specific with your caregiver about your needs and expectations. Establish early on what you are expecting the caregiver to do or not do. It may even be helpful to make a list for the caregiver to refer to while in your home. Establishing clear expectations and boundaries right from the start will help make the experience and relationship a positive one for both the caregiver and the person being cared for.

What if a caregiving situation isn't working out?

First, try addressing your concerns with the caregiver directly. If your concerns are not addressed, don't be afraid to get the home care agency involved if you need to. Remember, you must be your own advocate and there is no need to feel guilty about making your needs clear. Not everyone is a perfect match and home care agencies are used to being asked to reassign caregivers.

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be found in numerous caregiver books, including And Thou Shalt Honor: The Caregiver's Companion, published by Rodale in 2002, edited by Beth Witrogen McLeod. Martha should be discreet so that her parents don't feel she is spying. It would be helpful to repeat this appraisal every few months, dating each copy, so as to track any decline in function. Others who visit regularly might also be asked to make observations over time. Their notes might lend support to Martha's care discussions with her parents.

In addition, Martha might want to keep a watchful eye for the following warning signs:

- ◆ Appreciable weight loss or gain
- ◆ Sudden paranoia, combativeness, aggression or hallucinations
- ◆ Disturbing changes in attitude and self-esteem
- ◆ A noticeable decline in hygiene and grooming
- ◆ Excuses for skipping routine tasks like going to the doctor, the barber or the grocery store
- ◆ Lack of interest in friends, hobbies and activities
- ◆ Social isolation
- ◆ Unpaid bills, or notices about utilities being shut off
- ◆ Unsafe behaviors such as leaving food burning on the stove
- ◆ Frequent falls
- ◆ Frequent memory lapses
- ◆ Getting lost on familiar, well-traveled routes

As long as Martha's parents remain reasonably competent, earning mostly A's and B's on the caregiver checklist, they have every legal and moral right to make their own decisions, and Martha needs to respect this.

- ◆ While Martha's parents may not be ready to accept help just yet, she can use this time to research community resources, along with legal and financial questions, so that she knows what's available when they are ready to discuss it. She can stay in touch with other family members and close friends, to get their input and to get a sense of who might be willing to provide support when needed.

What's next...?

Martha needs to find creative ways to overcome her parents' resistance and facilitate the process. How she communicates her concerns to her parents is the key. For example: "Have you thought about..." when discussing her parents needs for help with personal hygiene and suggesting using a home health aide. Or, "Would you like...for your birthday?," if her parents are reluctant to

hire a needed service, such as a cleaning service. Martha needs to think in terms of taking down walls (of resistance) and building bridges. This approach is respectful and avoids confrontation, so everyone benefits!

References:

www.aoa.gov or www.thirdage.com

By: Hanni Epp, MA,LLP

Questions to Ask When Calling a Home Care Agency

1. Is your agency licensed, bonded and insured?
2. What kind of training does your staff receive?
3. Does your agency have any specialties (eg. Mental health, behavioral problems, Alzheimer's disease)?
4. What is the cost of service?
5. How will I be billed for services? Do you charge a placement fee? Is a deposit required? Are refunds given if I cancel services? How much notice must I give prior to canceling services?
6. May I interview potential aides prior to the start of their assignment?
7. What languages are spoken at your agency?
8. Must I provide meals for the aide?
9. What type of experience has the worker had?
10. What are the expectations regarding vacation time and holidays?

Attention Caregivers

Senior Resources has a durable medical equipment "loan closet" that will accept any gently used walkers, commodes, shower benches, etc. Any unused disposable medical equipment or supplies are also welcomed. These items will then be available for loan to anyone in the community primarily age 60 and over. All donations are tax deductible. Call Jay at 231-733-3570 for more information or to arrange a drop-off/pick-up.

**The Mission Of Senior Resources
An Area Agency on Aging**

To provide a comprehensive and coordinated system of services designed to promote the independence and dignity of older persons and their families in Muskegon, Oceana, and Ottawa counties — a mission compelling us to target older persons in greatest need but to advocate for all.

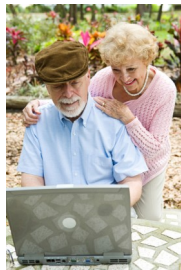
To contact us, please call

Amy or Mary at:

231-739-5858 or 800-442-0054

April's website: www.caregiverslibrary.org

National Caregiver Library is one of the most extensive libraries for caregivers that exist today.



Hundreds of articles, forms, checklists and links to topic-specific external resources are organized into logical categories on the side of each page. Click any category for a list of sub-categories, articles and other resources. Simply continue “drilling down” until you find what you need.

Readers Corner:

The Circle

by: Sally Smith

A personal account of the emotional and human side of dealing with dementia. Sally Smith, whose inspiring personal account--closing the family home and moving her mother into an assisted living facility--resulted in a book that critics have said is: "healing, hilarious and very helpful to those of us sharing similar experiences."

