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When Love and Care Collide: What Does One Do?

When your beloved spouse or life partner of many years is faced with the onset of a progressive illness or a sudden life-changing health crisis, it can become your full-time focus. While one is a more gradual transition, the other is an immediate change. The focus of this month's newsletter is how to survive the journey intact, possibly with some personal growth, and not to burn out and become ill yourself.

This journey of love and care colliding is also a dilemma for adult children of aging parents. Adult children may need to juggle a career and a family plus caregiving or care worries. The following advice can be helpful for all groups caught in the "caregiving" journey.



In most caregiving journeys the ill partner does not have the capacity to change their behaviors; in fact, their behaviors can become a focus of your caregiving stress. It is you, the primary caregiver, that needs to change, learn more about your family member's illness and become creative in your interactions for success and stress reduction. This is especially true with any of the dementias because the other party is severely challenged due to their illness.

I am going to give you five steps this month and more next month on "caregiver survival".

1. **Education:** Read, take classes, join support groups and learn as much as you can about your family member's illness. If they have a diagnosis of dementia, you'll want to know what kind of dementia it is. Your approach and your planning will be different based on the diagnosis. See the resources listed below for some ideas.
2. **Plan Ahead:** Make sure your legal documents are updated. If you are going to need skilled nursing or assisted living for a family member, meet with an Elder Law Attorney who specializes in helping clients as you plan for the cost of care and how and when to begin to look at Medi-Cal as a cost partner. Make sure you do not have the ill family member listed as someone who can make decisions for you. Discuss options for end-of-life care with your partner early in the process. See the resources list for a good example of an Advance Health Care Directive. You need to research senior supportive living for the future as well as explore home care by looking for three referrals to interview before your need happens.
3. **Build a Team:** It may include a close family member or friend, your attorney, your financial planner, and a Professional Geriatric Care Manager, also called an "Aging Life Care Expert". The Aging Life Care expert will help you create a road map and give you resources to explore. Examples of these resources are supportive living for both of you as well as specific living needs for your family member, but also day programs and other supportive community services. Once you have a plan you will be much less stressed.

4. Create a Self-Care Plan: At the very beginning of this journey find a way to begin a “mindfulness practice”. See a therapist, even if you are not feeling depressed, to help you keep a plan for “quality of life.” When you plan this out with a professional you will not feel guilty for having fun or enjoying a week without your partner. You will be able to say it is my prescription for survival as written by a professional. You may also design an exercise regimen – it can be something you do with your partner. If you do an activity like yoga or Tai Chi, that can be a mindfulness activity as well. I will give you more specifics on self-care ideas next month.



5. Food is Medicine: This is true for both you and your partner. Learn and read about diets like the MIND diet and the Mediterranean diet. These are anti-inflammatory diets. Inflammation leads to many illnesses. As a family caregiver, you need to stay healthy. If you find yourself emotionally eating to fill a void or if you cannot find time to eat and start missing meals, find a support group or nutritionist to consult with.