

Your Ticket to The Zone

*"Old age ain't for sissies."
Bette Davis*



*"...they dropped off the work merry-go-round and retired.
We envied their carefree lifestyle..."*

It's time to let out a dirty little secret: we are getting older. That means that if we are fortunate enough to still have them, our parents are too.

Of course, most of us think our parents have been old forever. After all, they were the old fogies who didn't approve of our music or the length of our hair or skirts back when we were teenagers. They got a lot smarter after we went to college and we let them in on all the neat stuff we learned. There was even a time when it seemed like we were catching up with them. After all, we were also worrying about jobs, bills, kids and marriages.

A few years ago, though, they dropped off the work merry-go-round and retired. We envied their carefree lifestyles tooling around the country in oversized RVs, playing golf or fishing. Some of them got involved in volunteer work and shamed us with their endless energy for SCORE, RSVP, and other senior volunteer groups.

However, if you picked up this book today, it is probably because you are about to enter another relationship with your parents. Something happened that made you realize you are about to enter "The Caregiver Zone."

BAD NEWS TRAVELS FAST

Ask any parent what is the worst phone call of their life and they will probably answer with some variation of:

"This is the police and we have your son . . ."

"This is the emergency room and we have your daughter."

We never think that someday we might receive another phone call that can be equally frightening. What do you do when the phone call is not about your teenager but about your elderly parent?

For me, the phone call came just as I was going into a daily staff meeting: “Hi, I’m your mother’s friend and she has had a bad fall. I am taking her to Immediate Care. Could you meet us there?”

As a long term care administrator, I have taken care of lots of other people’s mothers. However, this was different. This was MY mother. My caregiver switch flipped on as I hurried across town to Immediate Care. Fortunately, my mother had only broken her wrist. Unfortunately, it was a very bad break and my father could not be reached by phone.

My parents (both in their early seventies) had been staying in their RV near a large lake about 50 miles from town. My father was fishing on his boat in the middle of this lake without any means of communication. My mother, in her continuing pursuit of cleanliness, had climbed up on the picnic table by their RV to knock down a nest that an enterprising sparrow had built under the edge of the metal shelter over the table. After succeeding in her mission, my mother lost her balance as she was climbing down. Momma’s whole weight landed on her left wrist causing it to shatter.

That morning at the Immediate Care Center with my mother in intense pain and my father incommunicado, I had one of those “a-ha” moments: my parents are getting older. Apparently, the doctor thought so, too, because he carefully explained the fracture to me rather than my mother, the usual family caregiver. Whether it was her white hair or her pain, the medical people had cast me in the role of my mother’s caregiver.

JUST A LITTLE HITCH IN MY GET-ALONG

Maybe you didn’t get one of those calls. Maybe you just stopped by to visit your dad one day and noticed that his house smelled like the garbage hasn’t been emptied in a long time. In his kitchen, the only food you find is cereal and chocolate chip cookies. Your dad, who was once named “Best Dressed” in his high school annual, is wearing clothes that have obviously not seen a washing machine in a long time.

Maybe your mom just gradually finds it too difficult to go to church and her club meetings. She complains about those crazy kids driving too

fast—and she isn’t talking about your boyfriend in his souped-up Chevy. Her car doesn’t get moved very often and then one day it stops going all together. When you offer to get it fixed, she tells you not to bother.

Or, another variation of the phone calls happens. You live across the country and mom’s neighbor calls:

“I’m your mother’s next door neighbor. I really think you need to do something. I saw her in the front yard yesterday, naked as a jaybird.”

That is when you know that nagging little doubt you have had in your mind suddenly becomes real. Your parents need help and you are elected caregiver. So now what do you do?

WHAT WOULD MOMMA DO?

There is a comfortable myth that in the “good old days” families just took care of their elderly. Remember the grandparents on “The Waltons”? Grandpa helped out at the lumber mill until he died and Grandma just kept on washing those dishes. If someone got sick, the doctor dropped by the house with his little black bag and mother boiled water or made chicken soup. Some of us remember multi-generational families living together. So why can’t we take care of our elderly parents like they used to?

Answer Number One: The Numbers Game

In the good old days (think pre-1960) people just did not live as long. There were fewer old people to care for both in total number and as a percentage of the population. This was constant through the first half of the twentieth century. If grandma was over sixty-five, 94%-96% of the population was younger than she. If she was over eighty-five, almost everyone was younger than she. In real numbers, while there were only 122,000 Americans over the age of eighty-five in 1900, today there are close to 4.5 million and growing.

At the same time, the birthrate has gone down and we have become much more mobile with families stretched across the country. In the good old days, there were a lot more children and grandchildren to share the caregiving responsibilities for grandparents. Remember that while mom was making that chicken soup, her daughters were washing the dishes and the sons were fetching the wood for the stove.

In addition, since life expectancy was significantly shorter, grandmother did not need care for as long. After all, pneumonia was called the old man's friend for a reason. Today, antibiotics, aggressive surgeries, and other forms of treatment mean that illnesses or injuries that were life threatening only fifty years ago are now routinely treated and cured.

The longer life expectancy also introduces another difference between now and the world of "The Waltons": the "young old" are the caregivers for the "old old." It is very possible that you are in your sixties and taking care of a parent in his or her eighties. While you probably look and feel younger at sixty than your mother did, you are probably also still working to pay for your own retirement. You might even have a few twinges of arthritis yourself.

Answer Number Two: The Sicker/Healthier Conundrum

The reasons that people live longer—improved medical care, better food, less exposure to industrial accidents—also means that older people are healthier for a longer time. However, they are much sicker when they finally need care. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), this change is evident when you compare nursing home admissions between 1985 and 1997. The folks admitted in 1997 needed more assistance and have a higher level of disability at admission.

The very medications, surgeries, and treatments that prolong life also produce more complicated long term care needs. When mom was taking care of grandmother, not only did she probably have a few siblings or children to help share the load, but grandmother was probably not as sick.

Yes, arthritis and old age have been around forever. But, when grandmother was cared for at home she probably did not have appointments with three doctors, insulin injections twice daily, sterile dressing changes, and seven medications that needed to be taken and monitored for reactions and side effects.

Today, treatment continues for conditions that might have been left untreated a few years ago, especially in the elderly. This means that you, as the family caregiver, need at least a basic understanding of how the medical system works because you will be dealing with a vast array of

specialists, therapists, nurses, and other health care professionals. Even with the best intentions, these folks are usually too busy to really explain all of the ins and outs of arranging care.

Answer Number Three: The "Working Woman Thing"

While both men and women can be caregivers, in the past informal family caregiving was primarily the responsibility of the women of the family. Even if you would like to return to the old world where women only worked inside the home, the truth of the matter is that the vast majority of baby boomer women are also employed outside the home. If you are a man or a woman stepping into the Caregiver Zone, there is a more than fifty-fifty chance that you are employed full time. So are the rest of that informal network of adult daughters, daughters-in-law, neighbors, and friends who were available in years past to help out when Aunt Suzie had a spell of pneumonia.

In fact, one of the new realities you may be facing is the added struggle of maintaining a job while also being a caregiver. If you were in that first wave of working moms, you probably have some idea of what that means as you recall struggling to find good daycare for little Timmy, being passed over for promotions because you were considered less dependable, or fitting your work schedule around his school and activities. Unfortunately, your boss and co-workers are probably just a little clueless about how caregiving for an elderly parent may impact your work life. On the other hand, your boss may be all too aware as you are suddenly using up your sick leave taking care of dad.

In 1999, one of the first studies to look at this issue in depth was sponsored by MetLife Mature Market Institute and produced by the National Alliance for Caregiving, and the National Center on Women and Aging at Brandeis University. This study found that caregiving responsibilities impacted the caregiver in the workplace in such ways as reduced work hours, passing up job promotions or transfers, not being available to go for further training to enhance job skills, and other compromises that affected the caregiver financially and emotionally. It also affected the employer through lost productivity, absenteeism, and "presenteeism" where a person is present at work but not able to be productive due to exhaustion and stress.

By the way, even though the majority of the caregiving population is female, the reality is that many men are also struggling with the same issues. In fact, fully 25% of the households in our country are providing care for an elderly or handicapped individual. That's an awful lot of caregiving going on!

ENTERING THE CAREGIVER ZONE

So where are you in your journey through the Caregiver Zone? Did you just receive one of those phone calls? Are you just starting to notice some changes and are thinking ahead? Are you getting ready for your journey into the Caregiver Zone?

FIRST STEPS

By reading this book, you have taken a very important first step into the Caregiver Zone by gathering information. As we journey together through the Zone, we will look first at the emotional impact of becoming a caregiver. We will also look for signs of what kinds of intervention may be necessary, and when. The next part of our journey focuses on things to do before the "a-ha" moment—including finances and an overview of care options. The balance of the book is the nuts and bolts of caregiving in different situations. We end where we began by looking at your role as the family caregiver. By the way, if you are one of those folks who like to read the last chapter first, this is fine too. Sometimes you can't focus on caring for your folks until some of your needs are met. So if you are really hitting the end of your rope, now might be the right time to read that last chapter.

In addition, the appendix includes an example of an assessment for care, a glossary of common terms, and resources that will be very helpful as you travel through the Caregiver Zone.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Oh, by the way, my mother recovered fully from her shattered wrist. She never needed long term care. Despite two surgeries, she also never spent a night in a hospital. Medical care has changed dramatically since my

mother went to nurse's training in the 1940's. A few years ago, this type of injury could have crippled her for life. Instead, she had a long uncomfortable summer with bi-weekly trips to an outpatient therapy clinic. Now she is back doing all of her normal activities. However, she's not standing on picnic tables!

At least for now, my "a-ha" moment was just that: only momentary. As a professional in senior care, I know that this could change again with another fall. Becoming a caregiver for your parents is truly one of the hardest challenges you will face in your life. However, you can get through it if you do your research, establish your team of helpers, and work with the professionals.

Welcome to the Caregiver Zone!