Parent Care: Empty-nest syndrome hits parents and children

by Marsha Kay Seff

It's not only the parents of grown children who grapple with the empty-nest syndrome. Caregivers who lose their elderly parents go through a similar sense of loss. Many of them find themselves at loose ends, feeling they've lost their identity and purpose for being.

Dutiful and loving adult children look after parents for years, advocating, cooking, laundering, chauffeuring, toileting, medicating, etc.. Then, Mom or Dad dies and the grown children are left with countless hours to fill and, eventually, energy they don't remember ever having.

Now what? What do you as a FDC - former dutiful child - do with your extra time? How do you redirect the effort you once put into caregiving?

To begin with, you have get through the grieving process. Be patient with yourself; give yourself permission to feel sad, to grieve in your own way and on your own time frame. Some people limp to the other side much slower than others, and that's OK.

But you will get there. One morning, you'll awake and realize that the sun is shining. You'll feel lighter and happy again. You'll realize a whole world awaits you, one that doesn't revolve around prescription drugs and diapers. You'll start remembering the good times with your parent, while the tough times will begin to recede.

Take advantage of this opportunity to reclaim yourself and your life; you've earned it.

What is it that you used to daydream about doing? Did you want to return to school, resume your career or find a new one?

Would you like to find a job or volunteer work that's 180 degrees from your responsibilities for an aging parent? Work with children, crunch numbers, write a steamy novel?

Or would you prefer to piggyback on your caregiving experiences? How about returning to your parents' skilled-nursing facility to help make it what you always knew it could be? Do you want to become a nurse or a nursing assistant or volunteer to make a difference?

How about being an advocate for older people with no children or a help and inspiration to families just beginning this exhausting caregiving journey?

Are you ready to take on the broken health care system? Or to start redesigning the whole elder care system, so it makes sense when the baby boomers get there?

What all of you have learned from your caregiving experience can make a huge difference if you decide to use it. And what a wonderful tribute to the parents you loved and helped through their last stage of life.

OLDER POTENTIAL

Workers 55-plus are more productive than younger workers in white-collar jobs, according to 56 percent of respondents in a recent survey. At the same time, 41 percent of respondents believe older workers in rank-and-file jobs are more productive.

The bad news is that a higher percentage of employers believes older workers are costlier, according to the survey, Employer Attitudes Toward Older Workers, by the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College. Considering all aspects of employment, two-thirds of employers think an older employee or prospect is neither better nor worse than a younger person.

The overall study results show evidence that there could be opportunities for older workers to remain in the work force longer if they choose to do so.

And they might. For, according to the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College, other studies show today's older Americans are more capable of working at later ages than in the past. Several studies suggest that today's 70-year-olds are as healthy and mentally competent as were 65-year-olds three decades ago.

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