

Parent Care: Couple exhausted from caring for both moms

by Marsha_Kay_Seff

Just when you think caregiving can't get more difficult, you discover it can. Arline and Jim Forkas aren't just looking after one mom with dementia, but two.

This is the second marriage for the Poway, Calif., couple, who have been wed 15 years. They took in her mom six years ago when the three-bedroom house was just 800 square feet. Three years ago, his mother moved in. Both moms have memory problems and heart conditions. His mom, a diabetic who has had several falls, uses a walker.

The Forkases hired a contractor to triple the size of the house. Jim, who works part time as a computer systems analyst for F-18 aircraft, is doing most of the interior work.

"I still don't have enough places to hide," Arline says, only half joking. The former marketing sales director for a retirement home does most of the hands-on care.

Meanwhile, the couple's social life has dwindled. Although they met country-western dancing, they get to dance only two hours a week now. They're afraid to leave the women alone any longer. Then, too, remodeling has made money tight.

The mothers, who met only when they found themselves living under the same roof, "tolerate" each other, according to the couple. Their only conversation is centered on complaints about Arline.

And the daughter is exhausted, overwhelmed with daily activities. "We just go one day at a time."

Because her mom is on Medi-Cal, she's eligible for respite care from In-Home Supportive Services. Arline says she's inquired and is waiting for a follow-up call.

Bathing is a problem with both women. Arline's mom doesn't like to wash her hair, though she's a retired hairdresser. Jim's doesn't bathe, though the couple hope that a new shower bench will make it less foreboding.

I suggest the couple contact the Alzheimer's Association for some tips, as bathing is a common problem

for people with dementia. I also suggest hiring a professional to shower the women. Often, a stranger gets better results than family.

How about day care, I ask. Arline says the women don't want to go.

Time for tough love. Before she ends up sick, I tell Arline, she needs time off. Don't ask the women; tell them they're going to day care. Start by taking them to lunch. Then, try once a week, increasing the time gradually. Sitting home, staring at the TV, is no quality of life for the older women anyway.

It's obvious the Forkases are giving their role as caregivers their all. They believe they have no choice, and they're honest enough to admit they're resentful. Though Arline can still laugh at the situation, she says her fuse is shorter than it used to be; so is Jim's.

So what do they do for stress relief? Are they exercising?

Jim has given up biking and golf, but walks occasionally. Arline says she doesn't have time.

I suggest she throw one mom at a time into a wheelchair and push her around the block.

But they don't have wheelchairs.

I advise her to contact their doctors and ask for prescriptions for their HMOs.

What about the future, I ask. The couple say they haven't thought about it because the caregiving seems endless.

Fortunately, there's a hot tub in the backyard and the couple have been hanging out in it lately. "It's our escape," Arline says.

I picture someone finding two shriveled bodies one morning in the tub, and I pray this nice couple can find some help before that happens.

Marsha Kay Seff is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's www.sandiegoeldercare.com, a Web site for older folks and their caregivers. She can be contacted at marsha.seff@uniontrib.com.

Parent Care: Couple exhausted from caring for both moms by Marsha_Kay_Seff