

Parent Care: Only so much anyone can do as a caregiver

by *Marsha_Kay_Seff*

A daughter, who preferred to remain anonymous, left a voice mail explaining her plight and asking if I could write about the subject.

A parent herself, she has been caring for her dad in her home for seven years. Now, he's 91 and her responsibilities have become overwhelming. She's had to move him to a retirement home.

"Dad keeps telling me he wants to come home," she said. "It breaks my heart, but I have to think of myself and my kids."

She knows she did the right thing. Even so, she feels guilty.

First off, guilt doesn't help. Besides, there's no reason to feel guilty. After looking after her dad for so long, she needs time to tend to herself and her children.

In a perfect world, we'd all be able to keep our parents at home for the rest of their lives. We'd have the time and energy and know-how to do it all.

But many of us can't handle the intensity of long-term caring, especially without hiring help. Studies show that caregivers often poop out and become ill. The smart ones realize when they have reached their limit.

What this daughter might not realize now is that she's not giving up her role as caregiver, only moving it to another level. She'll be surprised how involved she will still need to be.

As for her dad, there's nothing unusual about his wanting to remain home. When surveyed, the vast majority of older people say they would prefer staying put. Most do so until their health and circumstances necessitate a move. Even then, only a small number recognize or admit that it's time; far more go to a retirement home kicking and screaming.

What many end up discovering are good homes and good places to live. Instead of being isolated while family and friends are busy, residents discover a whole new set of friends. Instead of watching TV all day, they choose from a variety of activities. Instead of skipping meals or grabbing fast food, they eat in

restaurant-style dining rooms with chef-prepared meals and people to talk with.

Many residents end up thriving in a retirement home, though it might take them several months to adapt. And their children discover that, because they're not exhausted and harried, they enjoy time with parents more.

Nobody can force a parent to move unless that parent is declared incompetent. But we adult children, especially those of us with good relationships with our parents, do have quite a bit of clout.

The problem is that we're afraid to use it.

Sometimes, it works simply to keep reminding them why a move makes sense. Take them to lunch at a few facilities, so they'll feel more comfortable. Suggest that they try one for a month or two. People are most afraid of the unknown.

We have to be firm sometimes.

"Dad, I love you. I'm sorry I cannot be a full-time caregiver any longer, but it's affecting my health. You need to move to a retirement home, and if it doesn't work out, we'll try something else. Meanwhile, I promise I won't abandon you; I'll continue to visit regularly."

If your parent refuses, you need to establish firm boundaries for yourself. And map them out for your parent.

All this probably will be a work in progress. Go easy on yourself. Caregiving is the toughest job you'll ever do. Do what you can; be proud of yourself. And when you discover you can no longer do it all, give yourself permission to let go and find alternatives.

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

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