

Caring for an Aging Loved One

All of us know that our parents, spouse and other family members will eventually grow old and face inevitable health challenges. We even understand that sickness and death are part of living in a fallen world. But we are never quite ready for these realities to hit our own loved ones – especially when a debilitating disease gradually robs them of a once active life or seeps away their memories.

Forty percent of caregivers are also raising young children, living with the stress and heartache this family season can bring. It may become necessary to back out of other things in order to fulfill the primary calling to "be Jesus" by serving an aging loved one during their final days. Whether with a parent or a spouse, you can take steps to become proactive by understanding some of what this season will bring, including...

Lingering Grief

Long before an aging spouse or parent takes their final breath, you will experience an underlying grief as you observe their loss of vitality, strength, mental faculties and other traits that make them the person you love. Mixed with the physical and emotional exhaustion this season can bring, you may even feel yourself slipping into depression. Seek help to avoid allowing these feelings to overtake you and recognize that such emotions are normal and testify to just how valuable the person you are losing has been.

Special Grace

The most common duties handled by caregivers are transportation, grocery shopping, household chores, help with medications, and assistance with bathing and dressing. Despite the humble nature of such activities, the majority of caregivers use words like "rewarding" and "happy" to describe the caregiving process. Clearly, God gives a special grace to those who humble themselves to serve the aging and ailing.

Changing Roles

The care giving child gradually becomes the parent. The caregiving spouse is no longer able to rely on her husband's strength or wife's support. Primary caregivers can also encounter strained relationships with other members of the family who may expect input on or question difficult decisions. In one way or another, expect these relationships to change as a loved one's health deteriorates requiring mutual grace as you communicate the best you can under the circumstances.

Family Stress

For those who are married and raising their own children, caring for an aging loved one can add tremendous stress to the family dynamic. There is less time, less marital energy, less patience with childhood irresponsibility, and less ability to give everyone the attention they need. That's why it is important to involve the whole family in the caregiving experience. (Even young children can hold a hand or give a hug!) Everyone will need God's special grace, so be intentional about giving them opportunities to participate in what can be described as the ultimate family service project.

If you are in the midst of this season, our prayer is that God will give you the strength and grace needed to face the prolonged grief and quiet sacrifices required.

Dear Lord - please come alongside those of us called to care for an aging or dying loved one. Help us to "be Jesus" like we've never been before! Amen.

GOING FURTHER – Books available in First EPC Library

Complete Guide to Caring for Aging Loved Ones (by Focus on the Family) offers very practical advice to those trying to navigate the many decisions and issues associated with caring for an aging spouse, parent or other loved one.

The Caregiving Season: Finding Grace to Honor Your Aging Parents (by Jane Daly) offers practical advice to help you honor your aging parents well and deepen your personal relationship with Christ along the journey.

30 Days of Hope When Caring for Aging Parents (by Kathy Howard) offers the encouragement needed as you strive to care for your parents in a way that pleases God and shows them honor and respect while maintaining their dignity.

Recommended Websites:

www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/being-mortal/

Dr Atul Gawande has written **Being Mortal**. Pastor Joyce has developed a program to help you think through end of life decisions prior to an urgent crisis based on many of the thoughts of Dr. Gawande. Contact Pastor Joyce Harris at First EPC for more information.

Agingcare.com is a website pointing to resources for information, support and decision making for the caregiver.

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