

Becoming a Better Family Caregiver

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Eight Ways to Know If You are a Family Caregiver

Caregiver: this is a new role for me to consider. How did I become one? The following happened to me not too long ago, but it may sound like your story, too.

The day was a busy one, I was getting out of my first meeting and about to check my phone messages and email when my personal cell phone rang. The voice on the other end was unfamiliar. It was my grandmother's neighbor, informing me that my 94 year-old grandmother had been taken away by ambulance. She did not know the details or the destination. I spent the next hour frantically trying to find my grandmother by calling area hospitals. When I finally located her in the emergency room, I learned that she had fallen and broken her hip. I left everything and went to the hospital to be with her. I spent that night on a cot in her hospital room.

In those first minutes, I had become totally consumed with my grandmother's care, which I felt required my full and constant attention. It was during her recovery process, in the midst of my visits and concern that I became aware of the different roles that I played. At that moment, I was first and foremost a granddaughter. My role of wife and mother became secondary as my energy shifted away from my husband and children during this time. My role as full time employee was my biggest struggle: I couldn't be effective in my work and attend to my grandmother in the way that I wished.

Everything changed with that one phone call! Until then, I had not considered myself a caregiver, and all I could do was react. Knowledge of caregiving would have prepared me to be a more effective caregiver, and reduced the stress of trying to juggle all my other roles.

I invite you to take a moment now to review the types of caregivers shown below. Do you see yourself here?

Crisis Caregiver: Your family member manages most of the time on their own until there is an emergency.

Primary Caregiver: Your family member depends on you for regular assistance for two or more activities in their life. You make decisions that directly affect them. You may act as their representative in situations. You provide hands-on assistance with basic daily tasks (bathing, dressing, transportation, money matters, etc.)

Secondary Caregiver: Your parent, sibling, spouse, etc. functions as the primary caregiver and you provide assistance to them.

Working Caregiver: You hold a part-time or full-time job and provide physical or financial support to someone who depends upon your care.

Long Distance Caregiver: You live at least an hour's drive away and you provide much of your assistance by telephone. You depend on others to assist in caring for your relative.

Occasional Caregiver: You provide one or more services for someone on an irregular basis, such as furnish transportation, assist with major household chores, balance the checkbook, etc.

Community Caregiver: You give a cheerful greeting or make personal contact while making deliveries, passing by or making a special call to check on the status of someone receiving care.

Future Caregiver: You are not a caregiver now, but have friends or relatives who will probably need care in the years ahead.

As I reflect on the types of caregivers that we have identified, I now realize that I am a crisis caregiver, a secondary caregiver (my aunt is primary), a working caregiver and I am also a future caregiver. It took a lot of extra physical and emotional energy to care for my grandmother. My spouse, my children, and my employer were deprived because I was trying to do it alone.

I can be a better caregiver, as well as a better spouse, mother and employee, when I ask for help from others. By identifying myself as a caregiver, I've taken the first step toward seeking support.

How about you? Is it time for you to seek help?

Provided as a public service of the Caregiver Resource Network. The **Caregiver Resource Network** is a collaboration of Kent County organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.