



QUARTERLY

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Many (most?) of the elderly prefer to stay home

By Timothy Merrill, Editor

There is no dearer place on earth than home. You may have traveled the world from Paris to Shanghai, Oslo to Honolulu, but the old adage is absolutely on the mark: There is no place like home.

As health declines, seniors find themselves increasingly confined to home. Although they may wish to be more active, being at home is definitely preferable to a move to an assisted care center or some similar facility. Most seniors, when given a choice of assisted care or home stay, state emphatically that they want to stay at home.

Yet, for the children and other caregivers, home may seem to be less and less of an option. As pastoral leaders or care team leaders of your church, you will be consulted by the children of Mom and Dad who are now elderly and need help but don't want to move. How can you help?

The obvious answer is to bring in outside help. But many senior couples will argue that they don't need outside help. This

mantra will persist in spite of the obvious: They do, in fact, need help, but are unwilling, for a number of reasons, to acknowledge it.

When dealing with an elderly *couple*, one thing you can do is focus on the less needy one. Make the point to the more independent one that outside help could really benefit the other one. An appeal to a person's altruistic side may be enough to trigger the help that is needed for both of them.

You might also create a caregivers ministry team that could provide periodic household help for the senior. The point you make is that the assistance you would like to offer is not personal, or hands-on assistance, but help in managing some of the simple, household chores, such as bed changes, vacuuming, cleaning the gutters, yard work, and so on.

If a ministry team from the church is not able to assist in this way, in-home help is available. Seniors are more likely to agree that this help would be welcome, if it is not perceived that they, personally,



need assistance in performing personal chores during the day.

When working with the *children* of elderly parents, suggest that they gently remind their parents that any assistance they are suggesting would help them, the children. Let the elderly parents know that it is not so much they, the parents, who need help, but the children. Parents, no matter how old, often remain concerned about their children and how they are doing. If elderly parents understand that by accepting in-home care, they are relieving a burden their children are carrying, it will provide greater incentive for them to accept the help.

By working creatively with the elderly, we can help them realize their goal to stay in their own home, in familiar surroundings, and maintain at the same time some level of normal living.

Caregivers often suffer burnout

Look over the membership list of your congregation and put a check mark beside the names of your members who are caring for, or are responsible for, elderly parents, a special-needs child or a disabled adult. If they have been in a caregiving role for some time, they may “hit the wall” soon, or face a long, debilitating bout of burnout.

Burnout is not an infection that one catches randomly, or by accident, the

treatment for which is to take two aspirin and get some sleep. A caregiver may be hurtling toward burnout without knowing it, only to

wake up some day totally unable to function. That’s why, in your ministry with your caregiving members, you can be alert for symptoms of burnout, and help them, too, to be careful. Here’s what to look for:

- Sense of helplessness
- Change in eating patterns
- Work production tails off
- Decreasing interest in work

- Persistent fatigue
- Loss of, or withdrawal from, friends
- Increase in use of stimulants and alcohol
- Depression

How can you, as the pastor or a ministry team member of your church, help a person whom you have identified as close to burnout, or in one of the stages of burnout? Here are some strategies you might try:

- Stress the value of a quiet devotional time for meditation and Bible reading,
- Encourage them to join a support network of other caregivers,
- Attend a support group with burnout victims to get feedback and coping strategies and to make them feel they are not in this alone,
- Encourage whatever interest they may have in hobbies,
- Discuss with the victims how caregiving duties might be rotated with others,
- Encourage them to exercise daily and maintain a healthy diet.

The most important thing that you can emphasize to caregivers is that the first person who must be the recipient of their care is — themselves!

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