

The little things count ...

Caregivers bring beauty and enjoyment to patents as their needs change

By Lynnita Mattock

Lynnita Mattock is the author of the book, "When Our Parents Need Us: Caring for Aging Parents" (www.whenourparents.com)

My father died more than two years ago and I still am haunted by something that seems rather trivial. My younger sister, Lorraine, and I had been taking care of Dad and Mom for about six months, gradually increasing the time we spent with them until, between the two of us, we were providing 24-hour care. Dad had numerous medical problems including congestive heart failure and kidney failure. We were determined to provide the best care that we could.

One morning, Dad, a connoisseur of good food, told me that he was hungry for quiche and that he wanted me to use an old recipe from South Dakota. I kept telling myself, "Do it. Just make the quiche." But I didn't.

Unfortunately, before I could motivate, Dad died. The quiche was a tiny request, but he had so little to look forward to. If only I had just made the quiche.

Hindsight, of course, is 20/20. As my sister and I now look back to the time we were caring for him, we've discovered a few more things we probably should have done differently.

Take a break

Without breaks, exhaustion sets in, tempers flare, and decisions go awry. Taking a break actually bolsters your ability to care for your parents.

We decided to hire some companions for our parents. After convincing our parents, we chose two people to come in and help them. Later we added two more companions. This allowed us to take a day or two off each week.

Handling finances

Dad was meticulous with finances and record keeping. However, when he wrote two identical checks to the IRS, we knew he needed help. At first this was difficult due to his sense of independence and his no-daughter-of-mine-is-going-to-tell-me-what-to-do attitude. But eventually he seemed relieved.

Communicating

We learned the hard way to discuss decisions with our parents. I overheard a conversation between Dad and a hospice nurse when he told her he wanted to continue only taking medications that would provide comfort and to stop those that prolonged his life. A few days later he reversed his decision. Take time to listen to your parents and discuss their decisions with them.

Go with the flow

I learned, over time, to listen to my dad. If he didn't want to take a shower, sponge bath or do something else that I wanted him to, that was okay as long as he wasn't in danger. He was often just too tired and sick to perform the mundane tasks that we usually take for granted.

Additionally, one of the most important things you can do for your parents is to provide enjoyment and beauty in their lives. We walked into the house one day and found Dad sitting in his chair holding a pink cyclamen plant on his lap, a peaceful expression on his face. He loved flowers and just because he was sick didn't mean he couldn't enjoy them. One more thing: if your parent asks you to make a quiche for lunch, do it.

Caregiving Tips

Consolidate down to one doctor. This prevents extra trips to the doctor, conflicting prescriptions and arguments about which doctor said what.

Accompany your parents to the doctor. Construct a health history and current health status record with medications, food likes/dislikes, allergies, weights, etc.

Discuss your parents' wishes, such as, living will, DNR—Do Not Resuscitate, home care versus nursing-home care, funeral and burial plot. Also cover finances including, life insurance, pension, social security, health insurance and bank accounts.

If your parents have mutual funds or stocks, buy a Wall Street Journal the day of their death. This sounds crazy, but having to go back and find the base prices for asset inventory, trust calculations, and probate on the day of death is a monstrous task.

Set aside some money for burial expenses, bills, and your parents' house expenses until you obtain Personal Representative forms.