

Honoring Your Anger

Jane M. Peterson, MSE, CICSW, Psychotherapist, New Horizons Counseling & Diagnostic Center, LLC; Madison, WI

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Anger, in itself, is neither right nor wrong.

Providing care for the older adults in our lives can be a rewarding challenge for both caregiver and care receiver. However, caregiving also can be stressful because of the tasks that must be performed. The changes or shifts within the relationship between caregiver and care receiver seem to be the most painful. Handling these changes successfully is the key to experiencing a fulfilling and satisfying caregiving experience.

Changes in our relationships with the older adults in our lives, whether they are our parents or spouses, can give rise to a new array of feelings, including those related to shared memories, issues, and experiences that have remained unresolved. While many caregivers have had a loving history with their care receivers and experience no anger, others feel trapped, financially and/or emotionally, into caring for someone with whom they have not had a previously rewarding relationship.

We all are born with the capacity for a full range of feelings, but it is our families and our partners who teach us which feelings are “acceptable” and which are “unacceptable.” Anger, we learn, is an unacceptable emotion. It also is one that we avoid if we have suffered be-

cause of another’s misuse of anger.

Anger, in itself, is neither right nor wrong. In fact, anger can be a blessing in disguise because it serves as a signal that we are being hurt, either by being deprived of what we need to maintain our emotional balance or by having too many stressful events or tasks thrust upon us. Anger is a common emotional reaction to the losses brought about by having to care for someone who had been our equal or who had been the person we relied on for support and comfort. Suddenly that person is frail and needy, no longer available to help us or love us as in the past.

Providing care for our older adult includes trying to fit added obligations into our already crowded existence. Unfortunately, these additions may involve caring for someone with whom we have not had a good relationship, or possibly someone we don’t like very much. It is normal to feel irritable or angry as we adjust to the new situation.

We need to honor our anger, not deny it. To bury anger, to pretend we are not angry when we are, or to act out our anger abusively dishonors both us and our older adult.

(continued on page 3)

A caregiver talks . . .

Male caregiver from Clark County

When my wife of more than sixty years first began showing signs of Alzheimer's, I found myself taking on increased responsibility for the house, for meals, for her erratic behavior, and for her personal care. My whole life focused on trying to maintain some kind of normal life in what had become a constant storm of changes. Our daughter, who was working full-time and had three children at home, stepped in and did what she could by taking us to medical

appointments and doing the laundry. Our other children came as often as they could to give me a break, but it was never enough. I felt more and more isolated and blamed Edna, our children and even the people in our church and community who didn't seem to understand. I felt angry most of the time.

Finally, a nurse at our large medical facility put me in touch with Ben, who lived in a nearby town. Ben had cared for his mother while she suffered

with Alzheimer's. Ben helped me accept my feelings of anger and to find healthy ways to deal with the resentment. I still struggled every day, but with Ben's help, I no longer felt guilty. He listened and he helped me discover ways to get some time for myself in spite of few community resources. The last month before she died, Edna no longer knew who I was. It was comforting to know that I had done the best I could in being her caregiver. Now I try to encourage others whenever I can .

Especially for you . . .

Excerpts from Keys to Survival for Caregivers, by Mary K. Kouri, Ph.D.

What made caregiving easier for you?

- Time away and relief from the responsibility.
- Time for myself in the morning...I make coffee and read or watch the news.
- Reading the newspaper from front to back and doing the crossword every day.
- Starting back to choir practice for the first time in a year gave me something to look forward to.
- Keeping up my interest in photography.
- Hearing from my kids that they appreciate what I'm doing for their mother.
- Learning that I couldn't make it easy for her because dying isn't easy for anyone.

- The doctor's being aware of the caregiver, too.
- People recognizing how hard it was for me.
- My men friends and I going out for breakfast and not talking caregiving.
- Calling a friend who has said, "Call me when you need someone to talk to."
- Someone coming over to stay with Ruth while I go out for a couple of hours.
- A member of our club doing the ironing for me.
- Friends inviting me over for a visit or an outing or a picnic. I'm happy to be included.
- Learning to let the sick person go when the end is near.
- Making a list of people who were willing to help.

From your experience, what suggestions would you give to other caregivers?

- Recognize that it's OK to feel sorry for yourself sometimes.
- Indulge yourself with a treat once in awhile.
- Reach out for help.
- Surround yourself with people that understand that you don't control the sick person's living or dying.

Thought for this issue . . .

. . . getting angry is fundamental to being human.

Denying anger is as destructive as expressing it excessively.

-Harold Bloomfeld

Caregiver responds . . .

Q

As a caregiver, I am "on call" twenty-four hours a day. I live in a small rural community where there are few respite services available. I have found some friends willing to help me, but they seem frightened by the responsibility. How can I encourage them?

A

Being the sole caregiver can be overwhelming and isolating. It takes courage to ask others to step in and give you a few hours off from your responsibilities. Encouraging participation will take some planning and preparation. When volunteers first come in, stay with them during a brief

visit so that they can become acquainted or reacquainted with your spouse. Next, encourage them to spend time alone with your spouse while you do chores in another part of the house or in the yard. Once the volunteer and your spouse become comfortable together, try a brief trip away from the house.

Being sensitive to the needs of the volunteer is important. Learn their coping abilities, respect their time limitations, and express our appreciation for their contributions.

Q

My wife has Alzheimer's and our son lives in another state. He is able to visit only three times a year, although he calls every week.

The last visit he was shocked by the changes in his mother's condition. How can I prepare him for his visits?

A

Maintain an open and honest dialogue with your son when he calls. Help him prepare for his next visit by keeping him informed about the daily events in his mother's life. Invite his questions, but avoid general responses such as "She's fine" or "Everything's ok". Encourage him to educate himself about Alzheimer's and involve him as much as possible in health care decisions.

Honoring Your Anger (continued from pg.1)

Signals we may be feeling anger include:

- Showing a sour demeanor with the mouth turned down, irritability showing in the eyes and tone of voice;
- Being constantly critical, demonstrating one-upmanship, or becoming emotionally distant;
- Becoming upset with others when we don't get our way;
- Assuming we know what the other person is feeling, thinking or needing; and
- Silently submitting to unfair circumstances, resenting the circumstances, and then blaming or complaining about the person.

Our most crucial need is to take good care of ourselves. By dealing constructively with our anger, we can gain control. First, acknowledge the feeling. Second, face the anger of the past relationship, because unresolved anger festers and needs to be healed. Third, connect current anger to its past or present cause in order to avoid displacing it onto others. Finally, learn from the anger. Releasing patterns of negativity enriches and heals relationships.

Many people are able to change how they express anger by working with their older adult, with family members or with a support group; others may need to seek help from a therapist, especially if the anger and resentment are intense or if the care receiver is incapable of communicating sufficiently to resolve differences.

Yes, it takes courage to face anger squarely and constructively, but the rewards will benefit us and enrich our lives forever.

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